

Borderline Republica

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“You're very clever to have found of our hideaway.

Unfortunately, you won't live to tell the tale.”

Clopin, The Hunchback of Notre Dame.

First Part

Perspective

1.

“I am the Lord, and there is no other; there is no God beside me.

I am the Lord, and there is no other.

I make the light, and I create the darkness;

I make peace, and I create evil.”

It was exactly 20:32 when everyone, at the same moment, believed she had said it.

Yes - she had certainly said it.

There was no doubt.

With pupils black and glossy like a cockroach’s shell, her eyes sunk deep into the complacent greyness of her face, she stood confidently and declared, on National Television, what she truly believed. In the prime-time news.

And everybody, as usual, pretended they hadn’t heard anything.

The fault, surely, lay in the mixing of frequencies.

A technical malfunction.

Perhaps even the television set itself.

This particular TV stood in the common room of the “Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether Psychiatric Institute.” But that meant nothing. The television was not the problem. It was not the culprit behind the unusual sincerity of National Television.

What happened at that moment had been gaining momentum for months. World leaders had begun, occasionally, to tell the truth in the media - but only for thirty seconds at a time.

The trend originated from a new advertising doctrine attributed to Goebbels, derived from a doctoral thesis entitled: Tell the Truth So You Don't Have to Tell the Truth. It was based on the principle he had refined during his long career and summarized in the well-known mantra of political marketing: "A truth repeated three times becomes a lie." Thus emerged the new strategy of world leaders: once a month, for precisely thirty seconds during prime time, they would deliver a pure, undiluted truth before the entire nation - sometimes before the entire world.

Goebbels had predicted the reaction perfectly. Viewers would pretend not to have heard it. They would behave as if everything were normal. Anecdotes about diplomatic scandals or parliamentary theatrics might provoke outrage - but the undiluted truth, contrary to all expectations, provoked nothing.

Helen Weiss sat directly in front of the television at the Psychiatric Institute, trying to restrain her rebellious dark hair from bouncing around her face, when the announcement froze her in place.

She has finally said it.

The truth had entered the ether - irreversible - and Helen believed that the mesmerist's spell over the followers of the television cult would now break and they would wake up in four... three... two...

"Did you hear that?" Helen asked the eighty-year-old woman sitting beside her. "Daemona Maridal, the German Chancellor. She just declared, on National

Television, while addressing our Prime Minister Vladimir Gord, that she is our God - and that we are not permitted to have any other.”

“This granny? She’s no chancellor. Adolf is the chancellor,” the old woman replied.

“Adolf is dead. It’s 2016. Adolf, Churchill, Himmler, Roosevelt - they all died at the beginning of the millennium. Only Goebbels is alive. He must be one hundred and sixty-eight by now. Strangely enough, he still looks thirty-five.”

Before Helen could finish, the old woman lunged at her, clutching her hair and screaming:

“He is not dead! He is not! When he finds out what they are doing, he will come and arrest them! He will save us! He will save us all!”

A male nurse rushed in as the woman continued to struggle, clinging to her single, unshakable truth.

And so Helen Weiss, holding a thick strand of her almost immortal hair in her hand, learned something essential:

It is not wise to mention the truth.

More precisely - it is never wise to mention the truth unless it is part of Josef Goebbels’s propaganda strategy. The fact that she was in a psychiatric institute momentarily escaped Helen’s mind. The old woman suffered from amnesia. The last date she remembered was January 1st, 1933. She had been nine years old then. She recalled a ridiculous man campaigning for the office of Chancellor of Germany. He smiled at her and handed her a gift box, wishing her Merry Christmas and a Happy

New Year. Inside the box was everything the black-haired child needed most: bread, flour, oil, sugar - and even a doll made in China for the American market, discarded as defective because it lacked a hand. Why her memory ended there remained unclear. It was both confusing and tragic to watch a woman who had preserved, for more than half a century, the image of a future Nazi executioner - but only as a generous man from an election campaign.

She did not remember the war that began in 1939. She did not remember being evacuated from Germany when Berlin was reduced to rubble. She did not remember how the post-socialist authorities, uncertain what to do with the ruins, built a wall out of the shattered city itself. Most absurd of all - she did not remember how, in 1945, Great Yugoslavia was born in a flash of napalm.

Great Yugoslavia emerged almost accidentally: a federation of countries that did not know what else to become. The story, as it was later told, began during the Blitzkrieg. There was a popular coffee-flavored chocolate distributed to soldiers - "Coffeebon." It was advertised as a substitute for a miraculous caffeinated drink, its taste compared to the fresh wind of dawn over the homeland. Between the caramel filling and the chocolate glaze, however, lay a different ingredient. Methamphetamine.

While Churchill and Hitler negotiated history, the Balkan political elite consumed the Blitzkrieg chocolate with equal enthusiasm. A measurable quantity of meth entered their bloodstream. In a state of chemically assisted euphoria - inhaling immortality, gripping God by the thumb - they signed an agreement on the federal unification of six Balkan states. Later, the Republic of Amia joined them as the seventh.

Seven, according to old Slavic pagan belief, was an unlucky number. The authorities therefore insisted that Amia be referred to as the Eighth State. Eight would be emphasized constantly. No one would count anyway.

Thus the Land of Brotherhood and Unity was established on the unstable Balkan terrain. It succeeded largely because, at the time, Churchill and Hitler were preoccupied with postwar negotiations. Japan seized the distraction and quietly reinvented itself through industry and desire. The Netherlands patented improved versions of Coffeebon. Americans and Russians rehearsed the rituals of the Cold War. And the Balkans - quite unintentionally - enjoyed the lingering effects of Pervitine, euphoria, and universal love.

At the very beginning, the prime ministers of several European countries warned Roosevelt:

“The savages are building Yugoslavia - a country that will dangerously resemble a union where socialism and rock 'n' roll stand side by side.”

Roosevelt was not alarmed. His successors were even less so. They understood that utopias constructed under the influence of Pervitine required only one intervention: withdrawal. Remove the stimulant, and abstinence would do the rest. Paranoia would follow. After paranoia - pliability. They would soften like overheated plasticine.

In 1945, the world expected closure.

Germany was supposed to acknowledge defeat. The Red Army was supposed to march into Berlin under a banner of peace and unity. Hitler, Himmler, and - most theatrical of them all - Josef Goebbels, the small marketing illusionist with the stiff smile and damp palms, were expected to stage a final collective suicide. None of it happened. The war continued. Indefinitely. Everyone bombed everyone. Everything burned. Until Hitler and Churchill decided that chaos, too, required management.

At exactly noon, on September 24th, 1945, Adolf Hitler presented Winston Churchill with a bottle of excellent Irish whiskey and said:

“We can continue this war until every one of us is dead. Until the world consists of two bunkers. Inside them: crates of Heineken, VHS cassettes of Swedish pornography and a modest reserve of canned fish with an admirable expiration date. Perhaps even an Adam and Eve, if we are fortunate. It might not be the worst of worlds. Aside from the shortage of video players and can openers. Still - it is risky. We can proceed that way. Or we can conclude this by agreement.” Churchill considered the proposal carefully. A world reduced to two people and an abundant supply of alcohol did not

sound entirely unreasonable. But he had never liked Heineken. At that moment, this minor preference became the decisive factor in ending the war without victory and without defeat.

Both sides agreed to withdraw their troops. Negotiations began. Dialogue replaced bombardment. The division of influence among the great powers extended over the next fifty years.

It is said that in 1989, God himself intervened.

“Let him be damned, the one who made you,” God cursed himself.

“It is enough that each of you be modest and take only what you need.”

“Every man has the right to a decent life.”

Hitler’s marketing team immediately suspected interference. They supposed it was a spirit of Karl Marx showing up at the most inconvenient moment, just as the new system was nearing completion. The phrase new system, it should be noted, meant a slave dystopia. But such nuances rarely trouble a competent marketing department, especially when confronted with an uninvited metaphysical presence unfamiliar with market logic. With their hands buried in the pockets of black lambskin coats, they dismissed the possibility that God himself had entered the meeting. The Father of the Universe was unanimously removed from the session dedicated to the redistribution of global power.

In January 1990, an agreement was finalized.

Yugoslavia dissolved.

Adolf received the Republic of Amia as a token of settlement.

Soon after the colonization agreement was signed, methamphetamine, destiny, and buried AK-47 stockpiles rose from the ground as if resurrected. The pigeons of peace blanketed the former land of Brotherhood and Unity in white residue. Not even the Red Army could have rescued Amia from what followed. Thus one empire entered a corridor with no exit. And the old woman - now living in Amia - was diagnosed with amnesia at the "Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether Psychiatric Institute."

Many people who did not suffer from amnesia were nevertheless unable to reconstruct the logic of that fulminant war. Across Eastern Europe stood enormous factories wrapped in chains and barbed wire, with dust covered walls, wrapped in silence. Above their gates it was written: Work Will Set You Free. No one could explain why they remained locked and abandoned. In Amia, some insisted that, in times of economic crisis, such factories ought to be reopened. Young people, they argued, should work instead of drifting idly through their days.

Many people did not suffer from amnesia, yet no one quite remembered who had been allied with whom. Or who had been the enemy. The geopolitical alignments of that era had dissolved into rumor and reinterpretation. For that reason, the colonization agreement with the Post-Socialist Republic of Germany was received with caution. The Amians feared sanctions. Hyperinflation. Or worse - collaborators, kleptomaniacs, and war profiteers who might administer poverty as a long-term strategy. When Daemona Meridal became German Chancellor at the dawn of the new millennium, some genuinely expected steel hawks to descend from the sky. They did not. It turned out that even Nazis have limits.

Perhaps none of it happened simply because Amia was not worth the effort.

Elsewhere in the world, robots had already begun walking the streets. They drove taxis. Worked assembly lines. Sold intimacy. Bots - as they were called - had become advanced enough to perform all the occupations humans preferred to abandon. In developed countries, they were commonplace.

Amia did not produce a single bot.

A few arrived as foreign donations from Russia. Lacking industry, tourism, or functional infrastructure, Amia found no productive use for them. So the bots became newspaper editors, journalists, television producers, and political mascots. Prime Minister Gord expressed his gratitude in fluent Russian, concealing the fact that *balshoy spasiba* was the only phrase he knew. For American diplomacy, he possessed one carefully memorized sentence: "We are very sorry for whatever the reason for being sorry is." German he never learned - aside from the posture required when bowing.

Thus Amia remained geopolitically uninteresting. Its only potentially valuable asset was a blue mountain wrapped in ice, separating the Amian plain from the Russian steppes. In keeping with their modest imagination, the Amians named it Ural. Had they chosen something more dramatic - The Tooth of the Firstborn Vampire, for example - tourists from the prosperous world, fatigued by existential comfort, might have arrived in flocks. They would have gladly paid five dollars to photograph a jagged rock layered with moss and unpleasant fungi.

But economic development proved too abstract a discipline. In Amia, economics followed tavern logic: a new bottle of vodka was considered only once the previous one was empty. And even then, deliberation was unnecessary - someone from a brotherly nation would soon donate another. *Balshoy spasiba!*

Considering all this, the question remained: why did the German Chancellor need a small and impoverished country like Amia at all?

Anyone with even elementary knowledge of geography could see the answer.

To the east of Amia stretched a long, razor-thin border. Beyond it - fog, crystal snow, and Russia, standing invincible in its own frozen myth. Wedged between Germany in the West and Russia in the East, Amia was not cursed by ideology. It was cursed by coordinates. The West, faithful to its tradition of eternal competition, sought access to the East through Amia. What remained unclear was why unemployment had to remain above fifty percent if the territory was already secured for strategic purposes. Perhaps it was a psychological calibration. A nation must first become accustomed to earning almost nothing before it can be efficiently repurposed.

Amia was to become a market of refined misery - a place suitable for exporting surplus spirituality and discounted enlightenment. For example: unsold copies of Deepak Chopra. The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari - a book whose author had, in fact, earned enough to buy one, that he intended in the first place.

Amia was ideal for such a market because money there was sacred. Everything could be sold: identity, love, doctoral theses, medical diplomas, parliamentary seats, souls, bodies. Everyone - without exception - was prepared to sell either their soul or their body, while publicly insisting on their incorruptibility. Yet even corruption did not sell particularly well. What truly prospered on the market of misery were large, efficient machines capable of producing millions of unnecessary necessities and arranging them daily on fluorescent supermarket shelves. iPods. Bronzer. Lip plumper. Presidential elections. Artificial intimacy. Seats on cultural committees. Wonderbras. Positive thinking. Sitcoms about moderately unhappy marriages. Silicone dreams. Radical nationalism. Hollywood apocalypses - aliens, sharks, the end of the world. Democratic revolutions. Fifty Shades of Fog. The greatest waste of the universe. Now on sale. Twenty percent off. Buy one, get one free.

Helen Weiss was never entirely certain what drove people to spend their already meager wages on placebo commodities. Still, that consumerist

delirium filled the waiting rooms of the “Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether Psychiatric Institute” every single day.

Helen was a clinical psychologist and a volunteer in the youth department. From her first day of practice, she had not encountered a single patient suffering from the textbook disorders she had memorized in thick university manuals.

Instead, the corridors were full of functional people haunted by money.

Ninety percent of a nation that once described itself as rebels, warriors, and heroes now suffered from consumerism - precisely at a moment when it claimed to need warriors and heroes most.

Helen was not particularly alarmed. Treatment protocols were the same. In the “F” department, everything was treated with the same clinical calm.

If the Institute’s statistics were to be believed, Amia at the beginning of the new millennium resembled Janus: one face turned toward the past and sinking into depression, the other staring at the future and trembling with anxiety.

“I think something from my childhood is the reason for my suffering,” a typical patient would begin on a typical Monday.

“For God’s sake,” Helen would reply, “your childhood is fine. Your mother is fine. Your father is fine. Even your pets are fine. Only people without a future dissect the past looking for causes. Guilt. Upbringing. Too much love. Too little love. Neurotic temperament. It’s all decorative nonsense. They are exploiting you, Mrs. Tatiana. That’s the diagnosis. So spare yourself the archaeology and try to get some sleep.”

It was unprofessional. But, it was effective.

On Tuesdays, it was usually a young man.

“Don’t send me to them,” he would say. “Those psychiatrists with their neurotransmitters. If you want to kill someone - too much dopamine. If you want to kill yourself - too little serotonin. If you can’t sleep - noradrenaline. So what am I supposed to do? Sit back and let chemistry live my life?”

He imitated the clinical tone:

“Infantile personality. Weak ego. Depressive reactions due to inadequate resolution of the primary object relationship in early childhood.”

“For fuck’s sake, Weiss,” he snapped. “First I’m a neurotransmitter. Then I’m a spiritual cripple. If potassium and sodium are responsible for everything happening in my neurons, why are you dragging me through

offices? I'm a potassium-sodium pump. Why don't you just eliminate us and build better humans out of electrolytes?"

"Well," Helen replied calmly, "we're waiting for approval from the British Masonic Lodge."

He blinked.

"Look, it's simple," he continued. "Take a banana - potassium. Add sodium chloride. Salt the banana. Fifty percent of creation is complete. That's God's entire contribution."

"Maybe he's underpaid," Helen said, the corner of her mouth lifting slightly.

The young man laughed.

"He must be working for Chancellor Daemona Meridal," he added. "It's not easy being God these days."

His mood shifted visibly. The tension loosened. The laughter began timidly, then grew louder.

"You're a breath of fresh air in this place, Weiss," he said at last. "I have something for you."

He handed Helen a small black planner. The cover was embroidered in gold, a red ribbon stitched along its edge. One of those business planners no one used anymore - now distributed free in ketchup promotions.

It contained two sections.

The first: a phone directory, one letter per page.

The second: a daily schedule - intended for people who, unlike Helen, occasionally had plans.

She called it her black notebook of ruin.

Inside it, she recorded thoughts that had no practical value - fragments, resentments, unfinished sentences. She knew the notebook would eventually end up in a regional landfill, buried beneath chip bags, plastic cola bottles, yesterday's headlines, and cracked Chinese condoms that had betrayed someone's faith the night before.

Helen offered her patients the same advice she once tried to give herself - advice that had never worked.

Those who had once filled their shelves with titles like *Beat Anxiety in Ten Steps* or *Nature Against Depression* gradually discovered small personal universes. They found reasons to wake without the violence of an alarm clock. Slowly, self-help manuals were replaced with family photographs, Mayakovsky's poems, or amateur sculptures shaped in quiet afternoons.

Helen's shelves remained bare.

She attempted resurrection. Her heart answered only with arrhythmia.

At night, she devoured literature. Tolstoy. Hemingway. Camus. Kafka.
The room filled with the punk-tinged rhythm of Matosh - the smell of
weed, petty criminals, and sour wine.

Nothing stayed.

Not resurrection.

Not Africa.

Not the sea.

Not the cockroach.

After each book, each song, each intoxicated trance, she awoke to the
same morning view: Amia - corroded, exhausted, inescapable. A trap
disguised as a landscape.

Occasionally, people came to the Institute who were not ill at all.

They came to Helen with questions.

The Institute stood in Petitbourg, a small southeastern town whose inhabitants had rarely left its boundaries. Helen, however, had spent her sixth year of study in St. Petersburg - an achievement the locals treated as an expedition to another planet.

They wanted stories.

“In Great Russia,” Helen would tell them solemnly, “winter lasts from June to June.”

“Ouuuu...” they would murmur, sweating through the Amian heat, imagining snow.

“In Great Russia, Anna Karenina appears on railway warning signs - one hundred meters ahead.”

“Wooooow!”

“In Great Russia, there is only one exam session. No second attempts.”

“Whoa...”

Of course, Helen knew almost nothing about Russia. She had spent most of her time there buried in books thick as livestock, slowly discovering a practical truth: without money, a city remains closed to you. Without money, you are a permanent stranger.

From Russia she retained very little - examination deadlines, the blue walls of the rented room with oversized white flowers, and the alcohol.

“In Great Russia,” she would tell them, “you don’t add rum to tea. You add rum to rum.”

The people of Petitbourg listened with reverence, waiting for something magnificent.

There was nothing magnificent.

The heroic figures they imagined did not exist. A decorated veteran of some steel-hearted Leningrad was likely sitting in a dim bar, uniform worn loosely for effect, trying to impress a waitress studying abstract finance while drifting through the same market of misery. She would sip a Cuba Libre paid for by someone else, ask for a cigarette, perhaps something stronger. If she left with him, he would not care whether she stayed a night or a lifetime.

People were the same there as here.

The films were the same.

The economies were the same.

The alcoholism was the same.

And yet, whenever Great Russia was mentioned, Helen felt a tremor of sentimentality - as did most Amians.

It was the sentiment of two exhausted nations imagining they might share a different fate. Amia was occupied. Russia was defeated in a cold war. Two damaged bodies

were leaning toward each other like brothers in patched coats - the older whispering that everything would be all right. It might have been moving if the younger brother - Amia - had not been a clinical idiot.

Somewhere in that sentiment lay a childish hope that everything could still be repaired by a single decisive sentence.

If only Prime Minister Gord would appear before the cameras once - just once - and say with unwavering authority:

“The state - it is I.”

2.

It was just an ordinary day at the “Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether Institute.”

Monday, June 27th, 8:45 a.m. A fifty - eight - year - old woman who watches reality TV every day came to the Institute. One of her sons is addicted to speed, and the other is homosexual. She is desperate. She has always wanted grandchildren. What else is left for her to do except watch documentaries about people who eat plaster or stuff their heads with lard to look like Bratz dolls?

Possible solution: Put people in chambers and keep them in a state of hibernation. On the ceiling of each chamber, a small television screen broadcasting reality shows twenty - four hours a day should be installed. Thus, instead of having fun, eating, or living, people will watch prettier people having fun, eating, and living, and this will fill their hearts with a sense of life achievement at minimal cost.

Monday, June 27th, 10:28 a.m. The nurses brought in a thin girl with platinum hair. She pinches the skin on her elbow, showing how full of fat it is, and shouts, “I’m fat. Fat. Faaaaat. Pig. Sow. Let me vomit. Please, I need to vomit; otherwise, I will never marry a rich businessman who drives a Jeep.”

Possible solution: Innovations through which the Jeep could be improved enough to develop a minimal free will and legal capacity, including the right to marry. In this case, the Jeep driver, as a mediator in the situation, could be eliminated as unnecessary - which he essentially is - and the ambitious girl would be able to marry the Jeep directly.

Monday, June 27th, 11:15 a.m. Iliya Barouza Medyakov arrived.

Possible solution: There is none. This is Iliya Barouza Medyakov.

“I’ll kill her!” Iliya says, his sclera red like two glowing fireballs. “I will kill her, and not even a crumb will remain!”

“Again?” Helen asks.

Iliya Barouza Medyakov is of Indian and Russian origin, and he does not understand how he found himself in Amia, from which he has been trying to escape to the north of Canada for years. The person he wants to kill is the finance director of “Milver,” where Iliya works, and she has an unusual, recognizable name of Polish or Czech origin - Petra Shutjurevka.

Shutjurevka is one of those narcissistic psychopaths with red fingernails, high heels, and the naïve gaze of a respectable older woman. As Iliya describes her, she is short and slender like a birch, pale - skinned and black - haired, always quiet and measured in her movements, yet so perfidious that she could kill a man with a teaspoon. Iliya Barouza Medyakov comes to the Institute at least twice a month, screaming that he will decapitate her.

Of course, Iliya himself knows that he is merely scaring flies, and that if he ever found himself face to face with Shutjurevka while holding a hunting knife, the situation would unfold like this: he would be cooling the mistress with a fan, while that knife would be used by Shutjurevka to beautify her pubic hair.

Even though Iliya Barouza Medyakov, according to all the rules of modern medicine, was classified as a pathological case, Helen wrote the name “Petra Shutjurevka” in bold letters in her black notebook of ruin, not knowing what to do with the name she had written, yet firmly resolved to record it - just as innovative people record serious

problems requiring quick and radical solutions, only to later realize that the problem is centuries old and that there is no solution, that the necessity of the solution and the magnitude of the problem are inversely proportional to the possibility of solving it.

“I am the Lord, and there is no other; there is no God beside me. I have girded you, though you do not know me, so that they may know, from the rising of the sun to its setting, that there is none besides me. I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create evil...” the television at the “Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether Institute” whispered again.

The problem with televisions in places of collective existence was similar to the problem of people in collective communities - you cannot turn them off.

The amplified sound of the TV woke Iliya Barouza Medyakov. He looked at the screen with sleepy eyes and frowned.

“I’d rather die than watch this Daemona. What’s next, Vladimir Gord?”

These were the last words of Iliya Barouza Medyakov, as the image of the doll - like chancellor was replaced by the lunatic figure of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Amia, Vladimir Gord.

On Tuesday, June 28th, Iliya Barouza Medyakov committed suicide by shooting himself in the mouth.

On Wednesday, June 29th, early in the morning, Shutjurevka suffered a heart attack with a fatal outcome.

Helen opened her black notebook and crossed out Shutjurevka's name.

On the day Shutjurevka died, the director of the Human Resources Department kindly invited Helen to his office, which, at seven in the morning, already smelled of brandy and tobacco. A few minutes of unpleasant silence made her nervous. He was trying to type a few letters on a laptop whose keyboard was bespattered with vinegar and apricot jam.

"Fuck the firm and fuck the state!" he cursed while nervously lighting a cigarette, and, in the usual Amian way, he used theatrical nervousness as a substitute for actually doing his job.

"Look, Weiss, here's the thing," the director of the Human Resources Department explained. "I have to let you go."

"Because of Iliya Medyakov?" Helen asked.

"Who?"

"Iliya Barouza, the one who committed suicide?"

"You mean responsibility? No way. People commit suicide every day. It's not that. I have to employ the county president's cousin. But look at this from the brighter side, Weiss - at least for a while you can live without a wake - up alarm. Those alarms are the horror of civilization. They sound like a combination of air - raid sirens and a drill for lobotomy. After all, why should you do things honestly? Who still works honestly these days? There are better ways to survive."

“What ways?” Helen asked.

“Politics, for example. Everyone I’ve hired for good positions in the past three years was recommended by respected local officials. In the accounting department alone, I have three aunts of the former mayor.”

“That’s all very nice,” Helen said, “but I’m nobody’s aunt.”

“Then become their friend,” he lowered his voice as if he were revealing some ancient secret.

“How can I do that?” Helen asked.

“First, you need to understand what kind of people you’re working with, Weiss. As in every business, the Big Boss will never promote the best worker. He will always promote the one most similar to himself. Or a good actor. Can you act, Weiss? It doesn’t matter - I’ll help you. You see, honest and intelligent people in Amia are certainly not in possession of power, because an honest man cannot drink Earl Grey with an occupier, and that is in the job description. Brandy, maybe. But Earl Grey... that’s debatable. Honest people who are not smart no longer exist; they were on the front lines during the last war, and they all died. Smart people who are not honest fled to Canada even before the war. So what we have left are fools without honor. And they are the ones who hold power today.”

“Okay, so should I pretend to be a fool without honor, or should I actually become one?” she asked in disbelief.

“It’s not as hard as it looks. It’s like whoredom. A whore sells love - and tell me, Weiss, when did a whore ever love someone? It’s the same with politics.”

“I don’t understand that concept very well.”

“The first thing to understand is this: we did not manage to defeat Hitler - but that has nothing to do with anything. Even if something unimaginable for us at this moment had happened, let’s say the Soviets had marched into Berlin, and Adolf, along with Himmler and Goebbels, had committed suicide, and the Third Reich had disappeared forever under the red boot of the allied armies, it is very likely that nothing substantial would have changed. Instead of Daemone Maridal, we would have been occupied by an American liberal slave owner named, for example, Madeline Olrajt.

Perhaps she would, like the Chancellor, bring to our market all those forgotten Mickey Mouse key rings with a button on the stomach which, when pressed, makes Mickey’s eyes turn green and he starts to sing Karma Chameleon. Of course, these pendants would reach us only after everyone in the West had already grown bored of them, after their price had been reduced, after they had spent six or seven years in a warehouse, after they had traveled through Russia, Ukraine, and Afghanistan, returned to China, and then, once again, through the Vatican, finally arrived at our market.

Our nation, as it is, would rush to buy the discarded pendants of a child’s dream that is no longer interesting to any market, and would be thrilled as if witnessing something completely new and sensational. But, well, we should not be condemned either - these are fascist times...”

“These are post-fascist times,” she corrected him.

“Fascist, post-fascist... same thing. Call them whatever you like. What I want to explain to you is the seed from which fascism grows again and again. The basic element of the modern economy, its entire foundation, is the economy of consumption. Consumption and profit are actually the same variables; we call it variable S - S as spending, or S as satisfaction, for example. Variable S is the only thing in the modern economy that must be maximized to unimaginable limits, to infinity.

Everything else, experts say, must be minimized - costs, resources, labor, taxes, administration, space, time. Everything else is actually decreasing, and if we assume that the goal of every reduction is zero, that is, nonexistence, we can assume that everything except variable S, which is consumption, might not exist at all.”

“This is the main reason for the collapse of the Amian economy. In America, when people grow tired of ordinary books and switch to electronic ones, there is a decline in the consumption of bookmarks. The factory producing bookmarks heads toward bankruptcy, workers are fired in despair, management is in crisis, morale collapses, strategy rots, and mission and vision become abstractions that find their place only in stereotypical pub jokes. However, US economic policy is such that even at the first signs of this scenario, the bookmark factory is transformed into a factory producing casings for iPods or tablets. Variable S remains at the same level - say, 700 million units of consumption per day - regardless of the fact that this figure has been reduced by 5,000 bookmarks and increased by 5,000 iPod casings.

In Amia, the scenario unfolds differently. People stop reading ordinary books and switch to electronic ones. The bookmark factory collapses, people are fired, the bankruptcy manager is drunk, the state auditor is in a psychiatric institution, the strategy is that there is no strategy, the plan has never existed, and the management is in a tavern. Consumers, during this transitional gap in which they have neither an electronic nor an ordinary book market, realize that they can live quite well without either. Both markets are ruined; factories producing iPod casings, laptop bags,

bookmarks, shelves for small home libraries, glasses, and prescription lenses go bankrupt.

The same process repeats itself with every existing product, and variable S falls down the staircase of ruin.

There is also the problem of technology and robotics. The biggest problem with today's robots is that they cannot stand still, and if you cannot invest in them moving forward, they will inevitably start slipping backward. It is the same with people. Sitting like this, doing absolutely nothing, they, together with the sofas on which they nest, return backward not only in the dimension of space but also in the dimension of time, and with their couches and buckets of chips, they invisibly and slowly return to the cave.

Then politics takes the stage. Politics serves to slow down this backward movement, because it is well known that time passes more slowly when someone repeats the same boring things within the same boring space-time."

"But you are exaggerating... and if you are not exaggerating, is that the policy you are recommending?" she asked.

"Well, Weiss, do you have a better idea?" he asked, visibly annoyed. Then he hurried out, carrying empty papers somewhere, trying hard to appear busy, leaving Helen without an answer.

With no idea what to do, Helen Weiss applied for various seminars and training programs on risk management in the modern business environment and the implementation of European values in contemporary business. She noticed that the main sources of capital were never mentioned anywhere: offshore accounts, organized

crime, and white envelopes. Without a clue, Helen Weiss applied to every job advertisement she could find.

“Then you would like a job, Anna Maria?” Bob Babet asked during a job interview.

Bob Babet was the owner of a small chain of stores that sold everything, and therefore every morning his shops were filled with that disgusting smell of pastries mixed with detergent scented with breeze and mountain freshness.

Bob Babet wore a purple tracksuit, and a golden pearl rosary was slipping out of his sleeve. He had bought the rosary in 1992, when two lovely bald young men taught him that business is done exclusively with one fifth of working capital. The lovely boys taught Bob Babet the basic rules of business by routinely rehabilitating him whenever he asked what would happen to the remaining four fifths of the capital.

“It’s not easy to get a job these days, Anna Maria,” Bob Babet said.

“Not Anna Maria, but Helen,” Helen Weiss corrected him, and Bob Babet did not like being corrected.

“Whatever. I don’t need those smartasses - doctors, therapists, astronauts. They come to me with these diplomas - Anglistics, geographies, who knows what. Anglistics - what the hell is that? This is Amia; we need real workers here. Come on, let me see how fast you can type.”

She typed slowly, and Bob Babet shook his head and frowned.

“You youngsters want to shuffle papers around and have someone pay you for it. They bring me papers here - MD, PhD - and they can’t distinguish detergent

powder from detergent granules. They should teach that stuff at your colleges! Practical knowledge! To recognize a box of gold - and - red Marlboro with your eyes closed, just by touch. To arrange chips on shelves by color. Grin veggie chips on top, hot chips below, then pepper, then onion, and finally classic. Thick - cut on the left, thin - cut on the right. That's the only thing that matters in life. That's the only thing that makes life today! I am the chairman of the board, my working hour is worth 400 euros, and even now I know exactly where the chips are placed!"

That was what Bob Babet, a successful small-town entrepreneur, was saying.

At the next job interview, for the position of accounting CPR management assistant, Helen was interviewed by the manager of the financial sector of a company producing preservatives for organically grown fruit jams and juices, Mr. DeVita.

"You have to understand," DeVita said, "only about one fifth of capital turnover comes from real work."

"And the rest of the turnover?" Helen asked.

"The second fifth of capital turnover is paid into the investment fund for the needs of the afterlife. Every proud nation must think about the future, and the future presupposes a responsible individual willing to give up everything in order to save for the period after death, when he will no longer be able to earn money. The investment fund is, of course, empty, but only for the moment, because capital is being transformed into non - existent matter when transferred from one form to another. While capital is in a state of non - existent matter, its value is reduced by inflation, and the third fifth is actually used to cover these losses. About the fourth fifth, nobody talks. The fifth does not exist. There are rumors that the sixth and seventh fifths of capital are hidden somewhere, but this has not been verified, and I do not wish to deal with such superficial speculations now," Mr. DeVita explained.

The flow of working capital was far more complicated than Helen had anticipated. As Mr. DeVita explained, using the banal example of a five - euro loan, after deducting four fifths of the capital paid into the general investment fund, what remained for the company was one euro. Then that one euro was divided into five equal parts, of which four fifths were paid into the state investment fund. The remaining twenty cents were again divided into five parts, and four fifths were paid into the intercity investment fund. What remained were four cents, which were again divided, and after payment to the local investment fund, the final settlement amounted to 0.8 cents. After covering current costs, the remaining 0.1 cents were paid to the employee as compensation for real work.

“And then you put your signature!” DeVita concluded his presentation.

“I have to put my signature? That is, as a responsible person?” Helen asked.

“A responsible person, of course. Someone has to be responsible,” DeVita frowned.

“But how can I be a responsible person when I don’t know in which interspace the money I receive actually exists?”

“That is a question we do not ask here,” DeVita explained. “After all, do you want the job or not? I do not have an entire day at my disposal for one candidate.”

After an unsuccessful attempt at accounting, Weiss decided on a probation period at Bob Babet’s market. Bob claimed that it was very important to have goals in business. Of course, these goals should not extend beyond the upcoming weekend.

“Any long - term plan,” Bob repeated like a mantra, “is already condemned to failure in such an unstable and fluctuating market.”

In modern business, “unstable and fluctuating market” is merely an embellished name for chaos that no one can control. Of course, a successful Amian entrepreneur such as Bob Babet had never managed to pronounce the word “fluctuating” properly, and no one dared to correct him. Correcting Bob Babet - and correcting babetization at all - was both funny and unnecessary: after all, Bob Babet was the only one who had actually become what he had dreamed of becoming as a child.

“When I grow up, I want to be a writer,” Helen nostalgically wrote in her black notebook. “That was the first thing that came to my mind when the teacher asked what we wanted to do in life. I want to be the creator of a story about a black horse running toward the horizon, alone and free. Everybody laughed. So I gave up the idea of writing autobiographical fables, and the next year, when asked the same question, I replied that I wanted to be a submarine pilot. I want to sit in an underground chamber, do nothing for three months, and get paid for it.

People who work under pressure, at high altitudes, in space, or underwater receive three special pills that replace their meals during the day: a pink pill for breakfast, a yellow pill for lunch, and a blue pill for dinner. My classmate Ivan says that his mother takes pills that replace meals, and she is not a pilot. Ivan also says that his father has not been working for three months, and he is not a pilot either. After all, the teacher says that all submarines, as well as rockets and military aircraft, have an automatic pilot.

Next year, I changed my mind again. When I grow up, I want to become rich. What else do you need in life? The teacher says that only successful people are rich. The teacher is lying and is not ashamed. Successful people, she says, know from a young age what they want to do in life and do not change their opinion every year. I really

try to give her a satisfactory answer, I tell her, but the question is difficult because, after all, I do not want to grow up.

No one actually becomes a cosmonaut or a president when they grow up. We become garbage collectors, cashiers, accountants, bureaucrats, and waiters. We become servants of people more successful than ourselves, and then, because of that, we become alcoholics, schizophrenics, and HIV-positive. The only thing we truly master is deception.

My name is Helen Weiss, and I am furious.

I am eight years old and want to become a cosmonaut and fly into the sky.

I am seventeen, and I want to become a starlet.

I am twenty - two, and I want to become an engineer.

I am twenty - five, and I want a good job.

I'm twenty - eight years old, and I want any job.

I am thirty years old, and I want everyone else to become cosmonauts and fly to the sky.

I'm forty - two years old, and I'm sick of your shit with which you are poisoning me all my life.

I'm forty - five years old, and I want everyone to fuck off.

I don't know how old I am and I don't want a thing.

You wake up one morning, you are thirty or forty, maybe even forty - five, you're not sure, and you realize that you woke up dead. Cold, swollen, grey as a bird and silent like a God. "What have I done with my life," you ask yourself, and you feel guilty and funny and superfluous. Instead of shooting yourself in the head as every meaningful creature who is trying to physically reach its spiritual death, you are doing something that will kill hundreds and hundreds of generations after you. You're shopping. By buying and buying and buying, you are feeding a machine that constantly makes you unhappy to be able to sell you happiness for you to buy again, to buy and buy. You are feeding a machine that makes you a loser so that it can charge you a book of mantras called "Not being a winner does not make you a loser - the power of positive thinking." Buy Now for \$ 0.99. Bookstore subscribers can read for free.

My name is Helen Weiss, and I'm furious.

My name is Helen Weiss, and my life is a fog. Everything is happening to me, and nothing is happening to me. There is no plot, actions, synopsis, and no plan. Jobs come and go. People like hordes of strangers are replacing each other in the fog of toxic, green light. Blitzkrieg relationships, www sex, Facebook friends.

My name is Helen Weiss, and I know that in your life there is also no goal that makes your fingers bleed, no bass that moves your stomach, no winner who will write history. Punk is dead. There is only a morning alarm, a quick sandwich, and a supermarket shopping list. News in a minute, mashed potatoes in a minute, coffee in a

minute. You are schizoid, depressed, and that is okay, because you never had any grand plans for yourself anyway. You are cold, apathetic, and you don't give a fuck.

You are sleepy and uninterested in the first summer cherries, in the distortion that raises the wild dust of oblivion, or in drunk celebrities on New Year's Eve. You hate your job as a salesman, the College of Management you graduated from because the tuition fee was affordable. You hate the fact that every person who passes you on the street mirrors your failure and fraudulence. You hate that you still love your country, although its entire population, through obsequiousness to useless leaders, through primitive fear, and above all through slavish reconciliation, has decided to kill you.

Lost and apathetic, every evening you read the news about the Middle East and the infantile, perverse pranks of empires unworthy of being called by that name. And then, one morning, you simply wake up furious.

My name is Helen Weiss, I am furious, and I am not the only one.

Helen Weiss read again everything she had written in her black notebook, then tore out a page and threw it into the bucket. We are furious, but who cares? she thought. In the end, everything she could say, and the way she said it, was only a beautiful and tragicomic way of saying that she was a loser and should drink poison for mice.

Bob Babet did not hire her. He hired a blonde with a nice hairstyle, which was not the case with Helen Weiss's hairstyle. Several strands of her hair had been pulled out (the work of an old woman with amnesia, a stylist from the psychiatric ward of the "Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether Institute"), and one strand had been burned down to her scalp as a souvenir from an evening when she was drunk on tequila and brought a lighter toward her hair instead of a cigarette.

Bob Babet thought that chaos in one's hair was not so terrible. What was horrible - unforgivably horrible - was when you did not care at all that your hair was in chaos. Also, Bob claimed, tomorrow you would develop a non - commercial indifference toward his chips, and then toward everything else that was truly important in life in Petitbourg in the Southeast of Amia.

That was why Bob Babet, a successful male entrepreneur, did not hire her.

She was employed as a worker in packaging production at a company called "Ache Daad," doing work so stupid that even machines could not perform it. Her task was to place plastic bottles into large cardboard boxes. There were twenty - five bottles in one box. The box was closed and taped with exactly twenty - two centimeters of duct tape. After three hundred and fifty thousand cardboard boxes, you would earn a salary of thirty - two euros per week. 0.82 euros per hour.

You work two days to buy tequila.

You drink tequila.

You set your hair on fire.

You swear.

Daniel and Diane worked with Helen. Daniel was a twenty - eight - year - old architect who read popular psychology on weekends.

I'm OK, you're OK. Everything is OK.

That was Daniel's philosophy of life. OK - the word that first appeared during the war as a short sign sent to a general to indicate that a military operation had been completed without casualties. Zero casualties. But also zero survivors. The perfect

war against a country is not a war of fire, but a psychological war. The perfect war against a country is not to kill a single inhabitant, but to make sure that none of them feels alive.

Daniel did not know that. For him, “OK” simply meant “okay.” Daniel did not know much, and popular psychology helped him know even less.

Diana, a red - haired young woman who cut exactly twenty - two centimeters of duct tape every day for 0.82 euros per hour, had finished her studies in creative writing, convinced that one day she would be a successful poet. That “one day,” however, had long passed. She was thirty - eight, had a child to take care of, and a bipolar disorder.

Everyone had shitty jobs, and they were all convinced it was only temporary. It was not. Death is only temporary. Absolute zero is only temporary. Banana republic is eternal.

At lunch, Diana read her song aloud. She wondered whether this was real life or just fantasy. Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy? She pondered whether she could escape reality. Caught in a landslide, no escape from reality. Sounds like Freddie Mercury. Miss. Nobody listens to Freddie anymore, and Helen was trying to explain that to her. She took Diana to the radio and said:

“Listen!”

“Listen to what?” Diana asked.

“The text of the song, Diana. The text.”

Shake your ass, yeah yeah, oh - oh, shake, shake.

Shake your ass, yeah yeah, oh - oh, shake, shake.

Ass. Shake.

“Listen,” Helen said, “such texts are being sold.”

“But not everybody listens to this. Some people love Freddie Mercury,” Diana said, upset.

“Those who listen to Freddie have no money. Those who pay, pay for this. When a successful small entrepreneur gets high, he does not ask himself if this is life or fantasy. He doesn’t give a fuck. He wants to eat. To drink. He wants to be admired. To be admired, everything around him must be stupider than him, so it doesn’t draw attention. And that’s not easy. That’s why everything around him should be boob - ass, even in moments when he is not in the least interested in sex. Or ass - boob - it’s all the same.”

“I don’t care; I’m a genius!” she shouts.

“I do not deny that. The fact that you glue boxes with twenty - two centimeters of duct tape for 0.82 euros per hour actually favors the likelihood of being a genius, because post - socialist business policy blindly follows gross growth indicators expressed through the so - called curve of national productivity. On that productivity curve - which is not actually a curve, but already a straight line - the genius proved himself equally unproductive as the mentally retarded, perhaps even more so. For this reason, the genius currently occupies the bottom of the social scale, and there is no indication that, in the near future - if that future exists - anything in that field will change.”

Diana looked completely lost.

Then Helen remembered how she could help her: somewhere in her pocket she had an old essay entitled “The Basics of Contemporary Literature in Conditions of Capital Crisis for Beginners” by the Chinese guru Ling Chi P. Dang. Helen was convinced the essay had actually been written by a Russian, and that the “P” stood for Petrushkov, but the Chinese had paid him a couple thousand dollars to sign it as Ling, so the Russians wouldn’t appear smartest again - a detail that had confused everyone connected to them, even the Americans, from the very beginning. Both that and the oil.

Ling Chi’s essay went something like this:

“All contemporary literature has one common characteristic, and we don’t mean consumption, but rather its tendency toward singularity. Since singularity in the controlled mind of a young man eager for dollars cannot be achieved without liberation from indoctrination, here we encounter the key problem: in modern society, liberation is actually an integral part of indoctrination and cannot be achieved without simultaneously being lost. It’s almost like climbing a rope whose other end is not hooked to the ceiling, but again to the floor. The author must first overcome this insurmountable problem, and since that is impossible - just as it is impossible to prove the cliché in which the cat is both alive and dead (a man who is alive and dead, the so - called undead, is our daily life, but with the cat it’s somewhat more complicated, and it is precisely the simplicity of her life, reduced to shitting and pissing, that becomes the greatest facilitator of the concept in this case) - he has only two exits from this situation.

These two exits are not mutually exclusive, so they can be used in parallel. The first is liberation through complete conformity: you should not even begin climbing the rope. If you have already begun - and it’s obvious you did, in your early twenties - you must destroy all manuscripts you have written up to that point. And in no way should

you burn them, because fire has the opposite effect, almost certainly bringing them into the light of day. Destruction is best done electronically, as is creation itself, because the intricacy of the e - dimension gives the whole process a mystical tone and the impression that none of this ever actually happened. Which, let's be clear, it shouldn't have happened at all - just like most of the things civilization has forced upon us daily should never have happened.

The other thing is LSD. Almost all contemporary literature - there is no doubt about it - was conceived under the influence of LSD. The only exceptions are the dystopians and Vladimir Nabokov. Everyone else, make no mistake, is branded by acid and lets it do the entire job for them.

The basic problem with literature produced under a psychedelic spell is that it manages to exist despite its obvious lack of purpose. And the reason is simple: everything around it is equally aimless. Today's literature, like every sphere of millennial life, is merely a sequence of words spoken by a Messiah of losers to other losers. The words themselves are irrelevant. What matters is the cosmic energy they supposedly transmit - the hope that all the other losers might one day become like the supreme Messiah: a loser with dollars.

If the miracle does occur, the axiom of aimlessness is so deeply rooted in the tradition of losers that nothing actually changes - certainly no magic takes place. The only thing that happens is that the newly acquired dollars are spent again on LSD, and the cycle begins anew, repeating itself endlessly without ever leaving the starting point.

The only real event in this whole ritual of turning dust into dust and ashes into ashes is the transfer of capital - and that is the only thing that truly matters.

Taking this into account, literature - however noble and ancient the word may sound - can today be treated according to the same principles as any other mechanism of capital circulation. The basic rules are as follows:

1. The protagonist must be a loser. Today's Messiah is nothing extraordinary; he is all of us. To be everyone, he must be foolish, overworked, and mortal - at least in the beginning. By "employment" we mean a nine - to - five job, or seven - to - three, preferably including Saturdays. There is no more refined method of transforming non - freedom into the illusion of freedom than the ritual slaughter of Mondays and alarm clocks, as if one were attempting to kill an eternal and insurmountable fate with cold steel.

2. Achieve the American Dream by constantly denying its existence. This principle perfectly mirrors the first rule of statecraft and international diplomacy: accumulate great wealth while insisting, at every turn, that money does not exist.

3. Bury the Dead.

Dead is everything not connected by a neural network to capital - everything cut off from the central system and the bloodstream of its circulation. In literary terms, dead is whatever will never be read again, not even by students fulfilling a syllabus requirement. Dead, therefore, is anything that no longer attracts attention.

This category applies primarily to poetry, but also to such genres as philosophy, quality, honesty, honor, marriage, and love - along with other forms of expression that now find their natural direction only toward a local crematorium.

4. The subject may already be worn out.

In general, the theme has been the same for four thousand years and is entirely irrelevant. Authenticity is achieved only by handling this same exhausted subject

through details. In fact, even the details themselves are always identical. The only difference lies in their arrangement.

Take, for example, an icebreaker. An icebreaker can carry entirely different connotations depending on who holds it: is it in the backpack of a Ural mountaineer, in the firm fist of Ramón Mercader, or in the elegant, manicured hands of Sharon Stone.

There is no need to think about color, style, or description - LSD will do that for you. If something with the prefix “schizo” becomes attached to your name, all the better. You will possess a permanent source of pure, natural dopamine - the so - called dope. There will be no need to spend money on synthetic street garbage diluted with washed - out speed and laundry detergent.

The only thing that distinguishes literature from other mechanisms of capital transfer - and the only reason it still survives, despite being an inefficient and sluggish economic resource - is that it remains a cheap instrument of mass control.

If the young author - loser we are discussing succeeds in capturing public attention and becomes their prophet, he can easily turn into a spark in a puddle of public gasoline - provided he is not careful about what he says. That is precisely why the state must ensure that he is careful.

It is well known that every state security service has its own methods, and the international community does not interfere with these domestic arrangements. In America, there is a system known as the “Salvation of Buridan’s Donkey,” in which the author is presented with a clear choice: a pistol on the left and a suitcase full of dollars on the right. This model evolved from Stalin’s version - except that in the Soviet original there was a gulag on the left and a gulag on the right.

In democratic Russia, the problem is solved differently: the author is placed in “Sputnik” and sent to the Moon for several years to sit and reflect. After the adventure, he either returns as an enlightened Orthodox Buddhist - or he does not return at all.

Under the influence of Ling’s essay, Diana enters a depressive phase. She wants to jump out the window. She wants to swallow an entire bottle of Valium. She says her blood pressure will drop so low that her heart will simply stop and she will fall asleep. Of course, she quickly swings from depression to euphoria and forgets to fall asleep. A few weeks later, she decides to die again. This time for real. No fucking around. It’s over.

I’m OK; you’re OK.

Looking at Diana, one realizes that all artists are bipolar. At one moment they believe they have created a magic that will change the world; the next, they are convinced their work deserves to be wiped with and flushed away. Sometimes they do take the paper, wipe themselves, and frame it. Then they become famous - because the rich are bored at that particular moment and in need of a new sensation.

That boredom is Diana’s only hope. She just doesn’t know it.

Diana announced a nervous breakdown every other week. She was falling apart. She couldn’t endure it any longer. This time it was truly the end. Nothing made sense anymore.

And yet, the breakdown never came.

Sensible, durable Daniel - solid as Germany itself - collapsed before she did.

It was Saturday, February 29th, when Daniel demolished his apartment. Yogurt, mustard, and Fanta seeped into the wool carpet. Feathers from a pillow clung to the ketchup of yesterday's pizza. Brandy soaked into a copy of Guns N' Roses: Greatest Hits. The neighbors wondered what had happened to him. He had always been so calm, such a decent young man.

"Danny, why did you fall apart like that?" Helen asked later, after he was fired from Ache Daad and sat alone in his room, staring at a fixed point on the wall.

"Don't you get it? I don't give a fuck about anything anymore. If everyone dies, I won't shed a tear. I don't give a fuck. Long live Manchester and Liverpool, long live the Slavs and the Tibetans - or everyone can just die, I don't care. Get it? If I go with them, I couldn't care less. I'm not doing anything anymore. I don't want to be an example for anyone. Today I look at people and I'm disgusted. I've just arrived, and I've already seen too many of them. It would've been better if I hadn't."

Thus spoke Daniel L. Sunt, called Danny - something like Zarathustra, only without the mountain.

3.

Helen nostalgically recalled her patients.

Person A. Female, 39. Dx: major depression. Married to a provincial doctor, yet longing for the romance of ancient novels, cotton candy sweetness, walks through winter fog, and dreams that come true. She feels a constant emptiness. The province suffocates her, and she escapes into fantasy.

Person B. Male, 44. Dx: paranoid schizophrenia. Claims that bankers drilled a hole into the occipital lobe of the President of the Republic of Amia and performed a lobotomy, rendering him incapable of coherent speech. According to him, they did this so the President would not interfere with the installation of Vladimir Gord as Prime Minister. Vladimir Gord is their man. For one hundred euros, he would sell both his mother and his country. He allows higher order states to use Amia as a landfill for medical waste, non-degradable plastic, and prisoners from Guantanamo.

All journalists who support Gord are no longer alive. They have been replaced by outdated robots who occasionally repeat phrases stereotypically, mix Cyrillic and Latin scripts, or simply shut down. The last speech they ever delivered was written in '91, and ever since, the same tape has been running - about great Amian prosperity within reach - accompanied by the same twenty-five-year-old photograph of the journalist in question.

Take Don Mickey, director of Red Television. For fifteen years he has not aged, not lost a single hair, and the news always shows the same image of him.

Such an obvious bot.

Person C. Male, 32. Dx: schizoid personality disorder. Says maman died today. He didn't cry. He went to the cinema. It makes no difference to him. He would never have come to the psychiatric institute on his own - he considers himself perfectly fine. The court sent him after he committed a criminal offense, to assess criminal responsibility.

Find the intruder.

The intruder is Person B.

Person B is telling the truth.

Growing up is a process of disappearance, of losing meaning - and madness resists that process intensely.

Madness is a state opposed to one's environment. Madness is chaos within a system that has order and rules. That much is clear. But what happens when a rational person finds himself in a system of chaos can be seen clearly in the case of the state of Amia.

Amia is a borderline state with delusions of grandeur. At the same time, Amia is a manipulative, obsequious slimeball drowning in debt. A rational person must lose himself there - piece by piece, limb by limb, feeling by feeling - until he becomes either apathetic enough to accept Amia or angry enough to burn it to the ground.

The process of losing oneself is very slow.

The first thing you lose is shame.

At first, you are no longer ashamed to wear clothes someone else threw in the trash. Instead of shopping malls, open-air flea markets spring up across Petitsbourg, where the market of misery reaches its ironic climax: capitalism quietly decays there, because items already sold once are sold again.

At these markets, they sell the garbage discarded by people who are worth more in first-world countries: their worn-out clothes and shoes, obsolete televisions, rotten furniture, pajamas someone once died in, photographs of defeated leaders, abandoned toys, unread books.

The grey economy flourishes here.

The Petitbourg market is a neglected field resembling what was once a popular tennis court of the Yugoslav Empire. The ground is still covered with fine red gravel and slag. In the concrete remains the imprint of the sole of the President of the Yugoslav Empire, J.B. Tito, who once played tennis in our modest Petitsbourg.

As people told for years afterward, J.B. Tito was furious when his Italian sneakers stuck to the fresh concrete beside the court - unaware that he had just left an imprint of eternity.

Petitsbourg's residents were once immensely proud of that imprint. They said the former president knew how to lose at tennis and never got angry. In the end, when he finally lost both the match and the country, that turned out to be true.

His initials became the internet abbreviation JBT¹. The imprint of eternity now lies in the middle of the market, usually covered by a pile of faded Bayer Leverkusen jerseys that no one has wanted to buy for months.

The flea market opens every day at dawn, sometime between five and seven in the morning, before the sun becomes unbearable and while a pleasant wind still blows. A Roma woman with barely visible feminine sideburns unloads a van full of substandard second-hand clothes illegally taken from some German or Austrian container. She places a cigarette where her freshly extracted front tooth once was, lights it with a match, and shouts:

“Fifty cents a piece! Price dropped, price dropped! Fifty cents a piece!”

What a lovely shirt!

Okay, a lemonade stain - or semen - it'll wash out.

A hole in the sleeve? It can be patched.

Flea markets are little treasures. Still, some goods are best avoided. Electronics are probably salvaged from the local dump and won't work. Avoid vibrators, anal beads, used syringes, and expired fish pâté - it goes without saying.

There is also an underground trade in drugs and weapons.

Helen bought a beige open-collar shirt for twenty five cents and wore it when she finally went to join Vladimir Gord's party - the Party of Progressive Forces or PPS.

¹ Meaning “WTF” in original language

How she finally took that last step from the cliff of futile resistance into the abyss of selling her being for small change remained unclear. She remembers it was night. The money hidden under her pillow for black days was dwindling. The refrigerator was empty. And Amia had always been a state of party-ocracy and nepotism.

The Party is Amia's god. Whatever it wills, it accomplishes. Surely it could, Helen thought, place her somewhere comfortable within the pyramid of Neolithic bureaucracy.

In Petitsbourg, Gord's party is still the opposition. The Party of Democratic Forces holds power. But elections are less than six months away, and Gord - like plague or leprosy - is expected to continue spreading and eventually take over Petitsbourg as well.

And so Helen entered politics.

They placed a cap on her head that read:

“Vladimir Gord – Amia in Safe Hands!”

They gave her leaflets and lighters to distribute door to door.

The procedure was simple. You ring the bell. A Petitsbourg crone opens the door. You look her straight in the eyes with a confident yet warm and polite smile and press a leaflet with Gord's face into her hands. If she doesn't unleash an enraged dog or sue you for violating privacy, you assess her. You chat. You persuade her to vote for Gord.

The crone insists she already knows that only Vladimir Gord can save her from nuclear war, locust swarms, and hordes of rabid cockroaches.

You reward her with a promotional gift - a lighter. Nothing cheaper exists that can still proudly display Vladimir Gord's patriotic face in high resolution.

Grandma happy.

You happy.

The local PPS branch chief happy.

Everyone happy.

Happiness spreads across the sky like holiday fireworks.

There is no doubt - the first thing you lose is shame.

Helen did not feel the loss of shame as the tearing away of a part of her being. It felt more like relief under the circumstances.

In a world that praises those who dance naked on blood they cannot see - like Salem witches at midnight in a graveyard - shame is a redundant emotion, if it can even be called an emotion.

Yet she did feel a bitterness she suppressed with all her strength. It was an Orwellian bitterness - a hatred toward Big Brother who demands you look at him as both god and cudgel, though there is no god there.

Whether there is a god or not is irrelevant. There is a cudgel.

And the cudgel would have done its work well - would have broken even the spirit of Helen Weiss - had that Orwellian bitterness not awakened within her.

That bitterness has always been civilization's initial seed of creation. Those who could not build walls plastered the future with it.

Simply put: those who could do nothing else wrote books.

But why write books today?

Helen had always believed that books are letters from a rebellious man to a confused loner in the future. Letters addressed to another century, sent to a man among inhuman beings whose neck is already tightened by the noose of the same gray day. Letters from a friend you do not know - letters that cross not only space, but time.

Yet the question remained: to whom write a letter in a country where the future does not exist?

"Fawning over the average reader," Helen wrote in her black notebook, "is the supreme waste of time in the worst historical moment - a moment that, more than any other in history, suffers from a shortage of time.

Nothing can divert you from your path as effectively as the average reader, because the average reader is the same person as the average consumer - or, worse, the average voter. The average reader flaunts superficial criticism. He recoils at a swear word or objects to the verb tense in which truth is written. He complains about too few adjectives and about too many adjectives; about simplicity because it is banal; about complexity because it is incomprehensible.

Criticism is a playground for children who think they are grown - a way to attribute their own infantilism to someone else, a desire to rule over another person's work. Knowing they cannot accomplish even a tenth of what great minds have done, they are capable of wronging the creator so deeply that they will, like Tolstoy, accuse him of misogyny when he is in fact a sincere feminist, or, like Jesus, attribute to him a posthumous clerofascist dictatorship when he was in fact a righteous man.

But at some point, they will all open their eyes. They will see that they stand in the syphilitic black hole of Petitsbourg, beneath the rubber sole of Vladimir Gord's boot. And the last thing they will see, once awakened, will be the white light of the atomic bomb - that imperialist vibrator - penetrating the infected cavity of despair they call their city and their state, just as consumerism has penetrated their poisoned minds all these years."

Those were the words endured by a notebook distributed for free during the promotional campaign of the ketchup manufacturer Merimarx - given with the purchase of five hundred grams of near-expired Merimarx products.

"But the reader," Helen continued her abuse of the black notebook's paper, "is an innocent child compared to the baseness of the one preparing his meal. The writer - the writer is the greatest swindler and manipulator. Everything he does, he does for money or for fame. And that is simultaneously deeply repulsive and intensely seductive, so that you despise him and envy him at the same time. The terrible curse of ambivalence!

At the very moment when a book is the only thing that can save you, that damned, self-indulgent writer wanders through the expanses of his financial comfort, sinks into a philosophy of convenience, piles unnecessary word upon unnecessary word,

and refuses to give you an answer - how to escape the fatal minute of your existence, which repeats until the end of eternity.

All that swindler will tell you is that, aside from the Bible, there is no literature for the poor.

And no matter how much you wish to approach his grand existence, you remember that your education is cheap and fragmentary, your geographical position highly unfavorable, and your experiences limited. It is like a mentally delayed boy - or in this case a girl - attempting to imitate a great creator without knowing the work of Schopenhauer or the life's oeuvre of Franz Liszt.

And that feeling of nausea, of disgust, when money sneaks into every thought - that is the moment when you simply wish to retreat to a monastery and free yourself from everything and everyone, especially those pretentious writers who have seen Paris and London, the cosmos and prestigious universities, the finest women and the finest drugs, and who somehow seem far dearer to God than all the others who must toil like oxen harnessed to the plow of a transition that has no visible end."

The moment she wrote this, Helen tore out the page and threw it in the trash.

Deeply aware of the absurdity of her own existence, she wondered why robots powered by fuel or solar energy were not simply produced once and for all, to halt the hyperproduction of human oxen. To reduce a human being to this kind of existence is not only sadistic - it is supremely unnecessary.

The entire nation, the entire world, is merely a mass of depressive zombies dragging through their days, aware that they are nothing more than foolish oxen who will die nameless.

And what difference, then, is there between art and politics? Between poetry and politics? Between life and politics? When the pretentious new era, like a stubborn bedbug, has crawled everywhere - even into the narrow space between the bodies of two lovers who no longer wish to touch one another, furious over unpaid bills and lingering debts?

Whatever we do, politics lies at its core. And if that is so, it hardly matters whether we engage with it directly or indirectly.

This philosophy served Helen as the perfect justification for her quasi-political activism.

The truth was much simpler.

Helen needed money.

One had to survive somehow (though survival is highly overrated these days - but Helen did not yet know that). And since political parties had always found jobs for their poster-pasting activists, this seemed the only possible path.

Neither Helen nor most party members at the time - while dipping brushes into wallpaper glue to paste Vladimir Gord's face onto a transformer, pathetically hovering over the Amian flag in the spirit of worn-out kitsch - knew two things.

The first: pasting posters would be the easiest and most pleasant task she would ever perform for the party, humiliating though it might appear. It is important to remember that all other tasks are far worse.

Every party has, in fact, two functions: to invent unnecessary and meaningless jobs to keep members busy, ensuring that those in power remain secure in the knowledge that no one will have time to organize in ways that might threaten their reign.

The second: the party is not interested in anyone's knowledge, intelligence, or contribution. The last thing power cares about is the well-being of those it governs.

The party concerns itself with one task only: testing obedience.

Members' obedience is constantly examined through perpetual reversals. In one moment the party supports an idea or a person; in the next, it fiercely attacks that same idea or person. The point is not the ideas themselves, but recruitment.

In politics, only those advance who reverse themselves at the same pace and in the same direction as the party - thereby proving that they have no convictions of their own, which is the first condition of political progress, and that they are ready to adopt the party's identity as their own, no matter how unstable that identity may be.

There is no ideology. No plan. No program. No goal.

The only ideology of the contemporary party is money.

The more money available, and the more centralized it becomes, the greater the paranoia of the Great Leader - and the more frequently the party will reverse itself.

Helen was pulled from her thoughts by lightning that pierced a cloud as light rain began to fall from a crack in the sky.

She decided not to think about these matters any longer; they always spiraled endlessly.

And if her head had to spin, it was better to drink rakia.

After all, when you sell yourself to a party that, with the blissful smile of Smerdyakov and the hollow eyes of a buxom folk singer, gazes at the false glow of the West trying to imitate it while displaying a supreme lack of both intelligence and talent - thinking and shitting become one and the same.

4.

“Helen, how do you imagine the ideal man?” some young man asked while devouring her with his green eyes and a half - drunken erection in the underground bar Mauritius.

“I’m looking for someone who has a bunker full of canned food. Tuna, tomato soup, corn, asparagus. That way we’ll have something to eat during the four months of post apocalyptic chaos that will follow the nuclear war. Do you know that after a nuclear war it will be winter and night for four continuous months?”

Ta - daaah.

The erection vanished in a fraction of a second.

The green-eyed man left.

“Where are you going? I’m telling you things of essential importance for the coming period of apocalyptic catastrophes and you’re not even listening!” Helen shouted after him.

Some people truly cannot be taught anything.

“Well, what’s wrong with you?” Tamara asked. Helen didn’t know her well enough to call her a friend, but by chance they now found themselves together, drinking a very good red wine with a resonant Macedonian name. “Why don’t you just settle down?” Tamara asked naively.

“Do you really think one dick solves all our problems?” Helen answered with a question.

Tamara fell silent and waved her hand dismissively.

“Your meaning of life is not my meaning of life,” Helen said, then immediately bit her tongue. She didn’t want to continue arguing with someone who simply wouldn’t understand.

No, one dick wouldn’t solve the problems, Helen thought, but it makes you stop thinking about them. Like Prozac. Like Xanax. Valium. Rivotril. Lexapro.

All these medications are cheap or provided free by the health fund.

The health fund begs you to take them.

The state begs you to fall asleep.

Fuck and sleep.

Fuck even if you don’t come.

Sleep even if you don’t dream.

Take out loans you cannot repay.

A loan to repay a loan to repay a loan.

Each new debt discreetly larger than the previous one by X percent interest.

Interest + interest + interest.

No exit.

Fuck and get pregnant.

Have a child.

The debt is transferred to the next generation.

Interest to the third power, the fifth, the tenth.

The loss of labor force due to increased mortality is easily solved by encouraging higher birth rates, and the fat, gluttonous demon of interest continues to live.

When, in a world of calculations and consumer obsessions, you think you can escape under a blanket and mount love, your spirit will chip away and you will lose yet another piece of yourself.

After shame, the second thing you lose is illusion.

Women, as one might expect, are masters of illusion. From ancient illusions - somewhere in the era of Ancient Egypt and the cult of the Ptolemies - the Great Female Idea was born.

Just as only accountants understand fractions of circulating capital, only women understand the Great Female Idea. The idea is indeed based on illusion - but not the illusion of love. The illusion of power.

According to this Great Female Idea - which is essentially an ancient Egyptian concept - marriage is a bureaucratic institution through which, upon its initiation, more than half of the world's circulating capital - and therefore channels of power - pass into women's hands.

That is, in truth, the only reason women rejoice at marriage.

Of course, the other half of capital manages to remain preserved in the form of funds or non-existent matter only because there exists a gender that is always one step ahead of women. Well - not always. But in certain centuries or decades, like this one, they get lucky.

At the threshold of the new millennium, that other gender realized three key truths:

- that for love, technically, they do not need a woman;
- that for marriage, neither technically nor legally (in most countries), they do not need a woman;
- and that their role as saviors rests upon the idea of honor, which grew out of the idea of morality - both imaginary and obsolete - and that, having understood all this, they no longer need to share their money, nor even its imaginary availability (in which the essential power of money resides), with anyone.

And so, after several thousand years of civilizational momentum, the Great Female Idea finally collapses, and illusion slowly rots at the base of the tree of knowledge.

Then arises a situation known as the Female Thought Boycott.

The Female Thought Boycott is a process in which a woman, like Mahatma Gandhi, refuses all forms of pleasure and constantly goes on hunger strike - calling it a diet.

But as the name itself suggests, the Female Thought Boycott at its core is not only the refusal to enjoy properly, to eat, or to play ball like the rest of the normal world - it is also the refusal to use one's stream of thought for any purpose whatsoever.

It is a kind of intellectual strike in which, for the sake of capital, every human idea - or even the imitation of an idea - is sacrificed. The woman falls into a state of prolonged hibernation and becomes a waxed bear on a permanent diet.

This is best understood through the example of a summer vacation in Palma de Mallorca. Or in some shithole. It makes no difference.

A woman with her husband and two children is vacationing in Spain or in Shithole. The walk from the hotel to the beach takes about fifteen minutes.

The husband is loaded down with inflatable mattresses, swim rings, bags filled with sunscreen SPF 10, 16, and 24 depending on the time of day. There are towels, olive oil, tuna sandwiches, carrot juice.

It's forty-seven degrees Celsius.

The husband struggles and sweats, shifts the mattress from one shoulder to the other, places it around his neck, shifts it back again.

When they finally reach the beach, he throws the mattress aside in relief, jumps into the water, and begins to play and enjoy himself.

And what does the woman do?

She puts on a hat.

Forty-seven degrees. She roasts like a chicken in an oven, yet she enters the water only up to her waist or knees, so as not to ruin her new hairstyle, her freshly extended eyelashes, or the silk scarf covering the backside she is ashamed of.

There is no reason for her to make use of the sea, because she did not come to the beach for the beach. She came to prove her sacrifice and demonstrate the Female Thought Boycott - all because she cannot dispose of capital which, by the justice of Isis, Hathor, and Seth, has belonged to her since the Ptolemaic dynasty and fifty years before Christ.

If a woman brings both a hat and a romance novel to the beach, this represents the maximization of the Thought Boycott and very likely signals a serious capital crisis within the next ten to fifteen years.

There is another thing that may signal a capital crisis affecting the other gender: lack of courage.

For example, let us imagine that a member of the presidency of the Party of Progressive Forces, Mr. Mulja, appoints his mistress to an important municipal function.

Her name is Lola.

One cannot say anything bad about her. She has truly magnificent hair and beautiful blue eyes. But in the position, which requires a strategic approach to a crisis financial question of capital in a state of non - existent matter, Lola is utterly incompetent.

Yet everyone adores the emperor's new mistress.

"Ah, how beautiful you are, Miss Lola!" said Person 251.

"Beee," Lola replied gratefully.

"How intelligent you are, Miss Lola! You are our new Maria Theresa!" said Person 252.

"Beee," Lola replied.

Lola - who was, in fact, Ovis aries aries (as she enjoyed being called) is being showered with flowers, compliments, and attention. They compared her to Elizabeth I, Megan Fox, and Indira Gandhi.

And then, out of a clear sky, Person 253 spoke up. A man with a deep voice, clearly not castrated like the other party members, leaned toward Mr. Mulja and said:

"Without any intention of insulting the lovely lady, I must conclude that the quality of European values at the very top of this party's presidency possesses such brilliance, insight, and agility that it fully qualifies for collective suicide. If, by purchasing fake Vatican jeans, we once agreed to the privatization of public functions in this schizophrenic - Caligulan manner, and if we were prepared to overlook the fact that the persons you appoint to positions you consider your private backyard belong to the

species *Ovis aries aries* - that is, sheep and nothing else - we did not agree to call those same sheep by the names of women who at least possessed the minimal capacity to attempt something socially useful.”

Mr. Mulja’s revenge upon Person 253 would undoubtedly be merciless. But at that moment, it did not matter to Person 253, because Helen - on the hood of a car, and later once more inside it - fell hopelessly in love with him.

She did not know his name, but she was certain it must be Milosh or Lazar.

Person 253 told her he was sorry to disappoint her, but his name was neither Milosh nor Lazar. His name was Sergei Yesenin. In truth, he said, he was a very gentle soul. What he had done was not an act of strength but of nervousness: sometimes he simply loses control. The voice of the people today is either neurosis or a performance masked by the heavy curtains of the republican parliament, the international tribunal, or the opposition party.

The next thing you lose is illusion.

All the Miloshes, Lazars, and princes who will save us with their great, thick Kalashnikovs are lies - fog and ashes from an urn.

Welcome to Amia.

Abandon all hope.

The reason Helen began thinking about the Great Female Idea and the Female Thought Boycott was not to justify her questionable behavior during the early phase

of the Babetization and Lollization of Vladimir Gord's party and the state itself. Nor was it because she wanted to jump off a bridge or swallow rat poison.

The reason was that, after joining the Party of Progressive Forces, she noticed something strange on her body.

After she began losing her emotions and experiencing the mutilation of her spirit and mind, a hole appeared beneath her breast. Exactly under her right breast there was now a hole, eight millimeters in diameter, through which she could insert her finger.

What had happened to her bloodstream, her bones, her internal organs in that area - Helen had no idea. The only thing she noticed, purely by accident, was the hole. It did not hurt. It did not interfere. It simply looked extremely unusual.

Fortunately, it was positioned just beneath her breast, which slightly covered it, so it was invisible from the front. And since her hair was long, it was not visible from the back either. What terrified her was the feeling that the hole had been smaller a few days earlier and had expanded by about half a millimeter in radius. Because of the hole, she began to panic.

If it widened, it would become very difficult to find a lover. She would have to join the army of disappointed blind women engaged in the Female Thought Boycott.

Of course, in Amia, the reasons for finding a lover have nothing to do with achieving zen.

First money, zen later.

In Amia, sex is always business. Even when not practiced professionally, a woman treats it as a hobby from which some small income may drip - recreational earnings, like selling handmade jewelry, except that the money involved is supposedly much greater. Or at least Amian women believe so.

The meaning of money - its godlike nature - becomes crystal clear only in countries where there is no money. Then you see what people are prepared to do. Then you see how human nature defies both religious and evolutionary ideas, because both contain progress within them, whereas the average human being lives in a vacuum rather than in progress.

This is especially true in Petitsbourg.

Petitsbourg girls are constantly in twelve-centimeter heels and always have polished nails. False eyelashes and tight “Dolce Banana” jeans are mandatory. Sex is very cheap, and oral sex can be obtained for a drink or a pizza.

If you want more, you must go a step further.

His name was Marco Virt. A member of the Liberal Party and director of investments for Petitsbourg’s ecological services. Married. Thirty-nine years old. Questionable university degree. Owner of several offshore companies for capital circulation.

Reserved. Measured. Important.

And, among other things, stupid as night.

Even more stupid because he refuses to admit it to himself.

Since the moment Helen kissed him like lightning from a clear sky, he began seeing her. He had no idea why she was there. He slept with her in order to understand. Half an hour later, he still had no idea why she was there or what she wanted.

Helen was patient. She gave him time to understand. Time to realize that he could receive more - if he paid honestly.

Finally, visibly irritated, she said directly:

“Marco, help me find a job. I don’t have money for rent anymore. We won’t have anywhere to meet.”

“We’ll meet in hotels...” he replied.

In a society governed by justice - if such a society exists - people like Marco Virt sell firecrackers and condoms on the street. In Amia, Marco Virt is the director of an investment fund.

Marco Virt persistently continued to call Helen. She did not answer. He sent her a message:

Join the Liberals and I’ll help you.

“Do you think I’m stupid?” Smoke practically rose from Helen’s ears in anger. “I can help myself that way - I don’t need you. Besides, I’m not signing anything. And anyway, I’m already a member of Vladimir Gord’s party. I have a cap.

Mr. Virt, you cannot get more than you are willing to pay for.

Mr. Virt, my chances of success increase by at least twenty-five percent if I ride one horse while betting on another.

I'm betting on the Party of Progressive Forces - they will win the next election.

You are the horse I ride, Mr. Virt."

"Then nothing," he concludes. "I can't help you."

Helen's next experiment was called Deni K. A high-ranking official of the Party of Democratic Forces. He called her competition, yet, in the spirit of fashionable feminophilia, respected her political affiliation. Deni does not deal with petty criminals - only with those in power. Deni does not get his hands dirty. He wears white gloves. He politely kisses ladies' hands upon meeting them. He buys chocolates and flowers.

He also buys anal hooks.

One part of the hook has a rubber attachment that fastens to the hair, while the other part ends in a metal ball the size of a snowball. The hook follows the curve of a spine bent into a dog-like position. Deni K. braids a girl's hair and attaches the hook to it; the other end goes in... well, that can be understood without unnecessary explanation.

Deni K. promises Helen a job at the clinic.

Deni K. promises her money for nothing.

Deni K. promises her the whole city.

Deni is arrested and held for seventy-two hours.

Deni is dismissed.

“That’s how it works here,” Deni explains. “Everything is done for today, for now. Don’t think about tomorrow, because tomorrow most likely won’t exist. In fact, tomorrow already doesn’t exist. We’re divided into those who live until the revolution and those who live for the revolution. Find some balls however you can. Choose a side - and choose it quickly.”

Deni does not know there will be a nuclear war, and that for tomorrow he will need nothing except pliers, many cans of fish, and a Russian military knife.

At that moment Helen burst into inappropriate laughter, remembering a cartoon about a cat who had many cans of fish but nowhere an opener. The cartoon is not funny at all and certainly not for children.

Still, she laughed.

That day Helen parted ways with Deni, but kept the hook. Just in case.

After Deni, she had less and less desire to go out. Her favorite short red dress with long sleeves and a simple fitted cut gathered dust alongside an unopened red lipstick of the same shade.

After Deni, it seemed to Helen that every attempt at cultural prostitution had been a miscalculation, costing her far more than it brought in.

It was therefore important to sit down over the black notebook - affectionately called the Black Notebook of Ruin - and conduct some simple financial bookkeeping. Bookkeeping is a useful tool in any trade, so why should it not serve in this, the oldest one?

“In every business,” Helen wrote in her black notebook, “it is necessary to calculate. Everything must be translated into the language of income and expense. If expenses exceed income for three consecutive years - that is, if you are at zero or in the negative - find another job. To determine whether it is worthwhile to have a lover, you need one accounting ledger, a calculator, and a pen.”

She drew a simple T - account across the page and began to calculate.

Column 1: Income from lovers

Number of paid drinks and dinners. Over three years, approximately two to two and a half thousand euros.

Gifted chocolates - two boxes, about five euros.

Flowers - around three bouquets, three euros.

A sixty euro dress, a gift from Brussels, made in EU. It sparkles like a Christmas tree and Helen has never worn it, but she includes it honestly in the calculation.

Column 2: Expenses due to lovers

Makeup, perfumes, hair. Annual body oil expenses - about two hundred euros. The same for almost every cosmetic product. Plus lingerie. Plus waxing. Plus tanning.

The calculation took time, but Helen finally arrived at the sum of two thousand five hundred euros.

Fine. She was in the plus - sixty-eight euros.

She had not included flea-market clothing, but then remembered contraception costs: one hundred fifty euros.

Final balance: –82.06 euros.

In a country where long-term goals are nearly impossible missions, it does not pay to have a lover.

Worst of all was that during all that time she had felt as though she was going somewhere, profiting, while the only one profiting in the entire story was Maybelline or Silver Flower or some other cosmetic manufacturer exploiting cheap labor in Cambodia or Laos.

And ordinary women like Helen, absurdly convinced of their uniqueness, continue to spend half their monthly income on things like branded mascara that makes your eyelashes seven times thicker thanks to anatomical brushes and micro-particles.

At that moment Helen understood.

As she watched the reflection of the sky in the window glass and the tiny dust particles swimming in the white light of spring, it felt as though a hammer struck her in the middle of the forehead, splitting her skull in two and releasing from it colorful, glittering confetti.

All that cosmetics, the entire industry of fabricated beauty, was one enormous profitable lie - a black hole of pointless time-wasting.

Seven times thicker eyelashes?

Who has ever noticed anyone's eyelashes being seven times thicker?

Has humanity ever invented anything more idiotic than a little bottle containing a mixture of black mud and petroleum that you smear onto the hairs of your eyelids in order to be beautiful, more beautiful, the most beautiful?

What a ridiculous, narcissistic ritual of supreme time-wasting.

And yet millions of these mascaras are produced in Laos or Cambodia under exploitative labor conditions - conditions that women themselves legitimize by purchasing those bottles of mud that make their eyelashes seven times thicker.

Two years passed since Helen made the accounting-based decision to stop seeing any lover, and they still called her.

"Come on, baby, sweetheart, we don't have to do anything, we'll just go for ice cream - not even a whole ice cream, just a lick or two..." Mario persuaded her. He was president of some local union whose name Helen no longer remembered.

"The only thing I want to lick right now is a Bufo toad," she snapped and hung up.

Mario then sent fourteen pathetic messages, slimy and desperate, as if he had just stepped out of an old romantic film whose script no one believes in anymore.

Mario is a drop in an already full glass of bile, flat cola, and the non-existent substance of one-fifth of domestic circulating capital. Mario is a man who has spent the last forty-four years on draft beer and bad tavern music. The last useful thing he did was read *White Mane* by René Guillot in the third grade - though he no longer remembers what happened to the horse.

After that absurd phone conversation, Helen understood him as the symbol of the downward slope of her life.

Mario is all of them.

Mario is Petitsbourg.

Mario is Amia.

This realization led her to lock herself in her room, in silence, devoted to fishing for peace. She stopped wearing makeup, stopped buying muddy mascaras and dirty bright lipsticks. In short, she stopped repeatedly being an idiot and giving a chance to the quicksand of contemporary decay and all its manifestations.

After two years of solitude, one could say Helen felt at least somewhat reborn.

She walked down her street, breathing in the freshness of early autumn and the warm wind scented with incense and grapes.

“Good day, God help you!” she greeted the old women sitting on the concrete alcove of an abandoned house, swatting mosquitoes with walnut leaves.

Two of them returned her greeting with hypocritical smiles, then turned to each other.

Grandma Reska wrinkled her cyanide-colored face, bristled her straw-like, orange hair, and whispered half - aloud:

“She’s still not married. Doesn’t even have a boyfriend!”

The other, Mrska, glanced sideways as if revealing some dark, perverse secret.

“I heard she’s... you know... how do they say it...”

Mrska twisted her words, trying to phrase something indecent in a decent way.

“They say she’s... well... a Homo sapiens,” she finally declared.

Helen had not gone far. The old women were half-deaf and therefore half-loud; she heard everything.

“Okay, grandma, I’m not a lesbian. I’m just in the negative. And I refuse to pay my lovers. So now I’m going to buy a vibrator, and you can fuck off with your mascaras and seven - times - thicker eyelashes!” Helen shouted.

The grandmothers stared at her as if they had seen an alien.

Someone (probably because of the whole vibrator - eyelashes - mascara story) called the psychiatric department. An ambulance picked Helen up and drove her to the psychiatric ward - this time in a role entirely unfamiliar to her: that of a patient.

“Do you know why you’re here, Weiss?” asked Dr. Mary at the psychiatric ward Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether.

“Primarily because of the grandmothers. Secondly because I’m a demon. Still, if it weren’t for the grandmothers, I wouldn’t be here. So, basically, it’s because of the grandmothers,” Helen explained.

“I see... and what exactly did these grandmothers do?” the doctor yawned, visibly bored.

“They gossiped about me.”

“Right... and what exactly was said?” the doctor murmured, glancing at her watch.

“A lie.”

“All right, Weiss. Is a lie really that terrible? It’s neither the first nor the last.”

“It’s not the lie itself that’s terrible. What’s terrible is that today a lie is the only thing that exists. Do you understand? There is no truth anywhere.”

“Yes, yes...” the doctor muttered. “That’s how every small town works. Those are the curses of provincial life, Weiss.”

“Of course. The psychopathy of one man is called madness; the psychopathy of an entire nation is called tradition. The only problem is that the whole world is a provincial backwater. And technically it’s impossible to escape to the Moon, because Amia has no Sputnik and even if it did, it would be broken.”

“Yes, yes...” the doctor frowned, rocking between disinterest and incomprehension. “I’d like you to take a very short test. I don’t have much time for you today - it’s my saint’s day, and I still need to buy a candle...”

“Do you believe in God?” Helen asked.

“Pfff. Who in Amia believes in God?” the doctor laughed.

“Then why are you buying a candle?”

“That’s just how it’s done here. You know... it’s simply the way things are,” she said, confused. “Anyway, I’ll give you a list of sentence beginnings, and you complete them. Understood?”

“Certainly,” Helen smiled, trying to appear cooperative, carefully concealing her profession so as not to disqualify the test.

She knew the test well. She even knew, more or less, which answers were desirable answers that would place her safely within the category of normality. But a worm of creativity entered her, like the devil himself, and as she chewed on the thickened end of the pen, she allowed that blind, deaf-mute worm to guide her.

The questions were marked with the letter “Q,” and Helen wrote her answers under “A.” The test amused her as if she were seeing it for the first time. It looked roughly like this:

Q: The first thing I think in the morning is...

A: ...that not even Osiris’s charioteer, who drove the Sun to the horizon at four every morning, cursed this damned awakening so much.

Q: During the day I usually think about...

A: ...European integration and the geopolitical situation under conditions of capital crisis, opening a completely new horizon that may one day paint the Sun red. The flowers and the sky will change color, and my party boss’s wrinkle will still mock me for being a nerd.

Q: In life I want to...

A: ...ditch everything and chill. What else?

Q: Love is...

A: ...if it had human form, it would be Franz Kafka. If it had inanimate form, it would be a narrow basement or a pig farm. If it were an animal, it would definitely be a malaria mosquito.

Q: Homeland is...

A: ...finally fucked to hell.

Q: The eighth deadly sin is...

A: ...membership in the Party of Progressive Forces.

Q: Apocalypse is...

A: Mostly an American movie. Or perhaps the greatest apocalypse is that there is no apocalypse, that we continue according to the well-known script of everyday life. Sometimes I like to imagine apocalypse as a new anarcho-tribal community organized around peace and self-sufficiency, though it would be preceded by savagery in which even cannibalism would reappear. Then again, cannibalism is almost like communion - eat a good man and perhaps you absorb part of his spirit. At least the bread of his body differs from Judas's chocolate bread of treason that party members must eat every day.

Q: Death is...

A: ...an escape from Petitsbourg.

Q: I am...

A: ...a loser or a shaman. Nothing else. Most likely a loser.

"Is this really necessary?" Helen asked Dr. Mary, already placing the pen on the table. "I mean... I didn't physically attack anyone. I just yelled a few absurdities..."

The doctor looked at her sharply over her glasses and nodded toward the door.

"Go on. Get out," she said. "And stop screwing around with decent people."

Helen barely squeezed through a crowd of angry citizens protesting about something. Judging by their fury, it was probably nothing important. The Amian people, when it

comes to important matters, rarely get upset. They resemble a slave who lunges at everyone - especially his brother - rather than at the slave owner.

This is the eternal and supreme illogic of this nation.

There is nothing harder than directing the Amian mob toward a goal that would benefit them. The mob will organize more readily to rename a street, burn someone else's flag, abolish God, parade for homosexuals or against them, for some territory - always for someone or against someone - but almost never for the common good.

Leave them hungry, sick, exhausted - they will still fight immigrants or homosexuals rather than the real problem.

And the real problem is that God decided to become the German Chancellor.

Perhaps the Petitsbourg grandmothers would stop gossiping about Helen if someone told them that God is the German Chancellor, and that the German Chancellor is a lesbian - therefore God is currently a lesbian, or, to use a more polite expression, a Homo sapiens.

No, Helen thought. It's easier to find a boyfriend and satisfy the current erection of provincial fascism.

When a woman schedules a date solely to satisfy provincial grandmothers, it's easy to imagine what that date looks like.

It began innocently enough. A polite blond young man sat across from Helen in the café bar Mauritius. He ordered expensive German beer. Helen sat with her hands folded in her lap, sipping cold instant coffee through a straw.

The date was typically silent and typically uncomfortable, like any meeting between an average young man and woman from Petitsbourg. Everything would have been perfectly fine if Helen had not read that fatal sentence earlier that day.

Among black lines of text, highlighted in blue, it read:

“By its very nature, every embodied spirit is condemned to suffer and to enjoy alone.”

The sentence struck Helen with the same force as Edgar Allan Poe’s claim about Baron Metzengerstein: “that all our miseries arise from our inability to be alone.” Feeling the weight of that windy desert inside her head, she took the recently purchased LSD blotter with Mickey Mouse printed on it and placed it on her tongue. She took it exactly thirty minutes before the date.

Under the influence of psychedelics, Helen did not cut off her ear, nor did she found a federation. Though she felt as if her body would split into Rome and Byzantium, into East and West, and the two newly formed halves would begin arguing over which version of Christianity was correct, nothing truly terrible happened.

The evening was simply somewhat unpleasant.

The pale young man sat with his legs crossed, bored, while Helen spent the entire evening conversing with a garden gnome in the garden of the café Mauritius.

“Bufo toads have glands on their backs that secrete a hallucinogenic substance called bufotenin,” the gnome explained. “Many Peruvian tribes lick the secretion from the back of this toad in magical rituals, resulting in psychedelic alterations of consciousness, visual and auditory hallucinations, explosions of color - a bright world of trance and catharsis. Smoking freshly milked ‘toad’s milk’ has five times the effect of LSD. Bufo is a way to reach meaning directly, by plucking stars from the nearest galaxy - or indirectly, by opening the path of creativity through which the spirit trapped between the ears finds a small liberation.”

Helen enthusiastically told the silent young man that garden gnomes are often full of useful information which they eagerly share with others.

That was when her would-be future boyfriend finally decided to flee.

“It cannot be said that I didn’t try,” Helen told the gnome, nodding toward the runaway groom and shrugging casually.

5.

“I was thinking of selling off what’s left of the state. You know - territory and such. A bit to the Arabs, a bit to the Belgians. A few million in my pocket and I disappear to some island in the Atlantic. I’m considering an island without too many infectious bacilli. Imagine walking down the street and inhaling some hepatitis or bronchitis... it would be terrible,” Vladimir Gord said on National Television a week before the elections. “You should vote for me so that nothing... terrible happens. Yes, yes, you heard correctly - terrible!”

Of course, the entire nation once again pretends it heard absolutely nothing.

Vladimir Gord speaks of the danger of an invasion of rabid wine flies, which he successfully prevented. After him comes a ten - second black screen of death - just enough for Amia to sense what will happen to it if he does not win the elections on May eighteenth.

After this minor clinical death of the television - just enough to frighten the people - the program *Be Happy You At Least Have a Television* is supposed to begin.

But before it does, something unusual happens.

Another black screen of death.

Now this is suspicious.

If they had announced bombing or a new morgellons epidemic, it would have been understandable propaganda - just enough anxiety to keep the population alert. But an

open threat of the death of the television program itself is already too dangerous. History shows that only nations without televisions rise up in revolt.

Obviously, this is not an intentional death of the television.

It's a "bug."

The program glitches. Completely out of control.

The black screen melts into a colorful rainbow bursting from a bottle of Fanta that crashes into a sanitary pad, while above them the coat of arms of Amia flies past and a song is heard:

"We love you, our homeland!"

(backing voice: "All eight of you sick!")

"We love you, to whom ever you bend!"

(backing voice: "I carry you on my dick!")

Something has gone seriously wrong.

The patriotic hymn dissolves into thirty seconds of total chaos - everything ever recorded compressed into a single manic burst:

Piles of canned food in bright red plastic bags.

Carbonated drinks exploding in the ecstatic mouths of cheap Eastern European models.

Satisfaction on the faces of grotesque teenagers.

FreeDOOM soda, from whose bottle the entire United States emerges, accompanied by the torch of democracy, a flock of dolphins, and pop-art waves upon which Marilyn Monroe floats.

A voice singing, "Vote for justice, courage, and honesty."

Then a voice that doesn't even sing that - some guy who always dares to look us in the eye, whose name no one remembers.

And finally, the orgasm of catastrophe: a happy family in a detergent commercial that removes all unnecessary stains and stubborn grease.

Pure white.

Safe white.

Twenty minutes of complete brainwashing - and the removal of its most persistent stains.

The server crashes.

Instead of *Be Happy You Have a Television*, Briggite Bonanca appears - the winner of the last season of *Big Brother*.

Unlike her usual appearance, Briggite is unmade up, dressed plainly, and clearly without the transparent silicone inserts of the latest generation stuffed into her bra.

She looks too serious for her role.

Her face is pale, capillaries burst on her cheeks, eyes wet, dark, furious.

She does not smile.

She looks straight into the camera. She clears her throat. She clenches her fist and begins in a rough voice:

“Achtung, achtung!”

She coughs again and repeats, louder, firmer:

“Achtung, achtung!”

Comrades, sisters, citizens!

I am not what the screen wanted me to be. I am not a filter that renders my face into botoxed blur, nor the left camera angle calibrated to make my breasts look three sizes larger. I am a woman who woke every morning in disgust and inserted two slimy pads filled with radioactive toxins into her bra.

I am a lie.

I am the naked chain of the dark industry of the new age - worse than all the others, because its historical moment is the only one in which freedom of speech is permitted only after it has been established with certainty that none of us have anything left to say.”

She inhales sharply.

“Comrades! Consumption is the fascism of the new age.

We are in a mental ghetto.

We are the new generation of total madness known as *idealism nervosa*.

Idealism nervosa (def.): the neurosis of superficial perfection. An empty gift box wrapped in glittering paper with a red ribbon. Packaging containing packaging. Painted nothing. Inflated nothing. Muscular and swollen nothing. Breasted nothing. A nothing in a suit and tie.

The fundamental trait of *idealism nervosa* is that a nothing, moving toward nothing, lives in a state of permanent omnipotent delusion.

The condition of grandeur illusion in *idealism nervosa* is the purchase of so - called upgrades - branded goods and services that color and package inner emptiness so that it appears vibrant and powerful.

Lack of purchasing power leads to a psychopathic readiness to do anything to obtain these upgrades. Inability to seize them results in psychopathic depression, relieved only when the victim of *idealism nervosa* fights for discounted goods during events known as 'Black Friday.'

'Nothing serious,' you will tell me. 'Nothing terrible! We simply need every Friday to be Black Friday, so that every Monday we have something to look forward to. Let us finally replace Christian churches and socialist universities with the only temple that truly matters - the shopping mall.'

Nothing new, you will say. Humans have always strived for unattainable perfection.

Did not Tolstoy's Father Sergius cut off his finger because he was not as perfect as his God?

Was it not for this that Dostoevsky crucified the son of that same God again?

Was it not for this that Kafka turned into a cockroach?

Was it not for this that Huxley fled into the constellation of lysergic acid and closed the door behind him?

Has the time of joy not finally arrived - the time when the ideal of perfection descends from the clouds to earth, attainable by anyone with relatively stable purchasing power and a platinum Visa card with deferred payment options?

Would not even Comrade Karl Marx, had he been born later, have stood on Red Square and replaced his famous slogan with a new one:

'Buy, buy, and only buy!'

Certainly he would, comrades - certainly he would!

Because let us be honest - we are ordinary people. Could we really have studied so hard, worked so diligently, and been loyal comrades as demanded in the red era? Or could any of us have been wise as serpents and innocent as doves as demanded in the white era?

Now the golden age has arrived - the golden era of late capitalism - when accusations of primitive accumulation expire and vanish into its infinite circulation.

Today the ideal has changed. Today the ideal is attainable!

Happiness is condensed into a single image in a housing - loan advertisement with the lowest interest rate:

Happiness is a slim, tanned beauty with flawless skin, whose super - absorbent pad does not show through her perfect white trousers, whose ironed blonde hair does not absorb the smell of the perfect lunch whose greasy stains she will remove effortlessly - with the right detergent - before heading to work and advancing her career with the same ease, fully refreshed, with full and perfectly dense eyelashes.”

“All of this around us is a super-absorbent, super-strong, extra-refreshing, intensely enriched, hyper-effective world of psychopathic consumption.

Comrades, we fought against all totalitarian regimes and the bonfires of holy inquisitions, against sadistic slave owners and treacherous kings, only to arrive at the final truth.

Predictably, the final truth was manufactured in China for an American corporation that resells it with a sixty percent markup. It is made from remnants of pink plastic and recycled Christmas ornaments shaped like the camel of Mary. It is light to the touch, resistant to breakage, and available online with free delivery.

And the war humanity will soon wage will not be a war because this truth disappointed us with its grotesque appearance. It will be a war because we do not have enough money to buy, buy, and only buy.

Therefore, brothers, sisters, peoples and nationalities, Amia! Throw away the truth they have given you and demand a new one. Haven't you had enough of this mud?"

Bonanca spoke for a long time before they finally cut her off.

Helen absorbed every word carefully, surprised by the twist in which silicone blondes began charging toward emancipation, but she did not truly believe that words coming from a television screen could influence anyone.

For more than twenty years no one has reacted to the daily political circus broadcast on that same screen. They would probably ignore Bonanca too.

Helen lit a cigarette as if nothing had happened and went out for a walk.

Closing the courtyard gate, she met the gaze of the grandmother who had called her a Homo sapiens and passed her proudly, eyes flashing.

But Grandma Mrska grabbed her sleeve and shouted:

"Comrade Weiss, comrade Weiss, listen, listen! We must rebel, I have to explain... I must explain everything... Petitsbourg is a 'Disneyland' camp. 'Arbait macht frau, der Reiter ist angekommen!' [Work will free you, the rider has arrived!] is written in black letters above the head of cheerful Mickey Mouse, who sells cotton candy and carousel tickets at the town fair to people who don't have a penny, yet insist everything is fine. That's why they call us Little-Towners.

Maybe geography is to blame, dear comrade Weiss. You know this - Amia lies exactly between East and West. On the East it borders Russia; on the West, Germany.

Amia is hot and black like the East, and so are the people here. They will smoke themselves into lung cancer out of inexplicable spite, claiming they don't care. And they don't care.

Here we live from today to tomorrow, and life has little value. Entire salaries are spent on Mickey Mouse and his cotton candy just to prove one's worth to people whose worth is, at best, questionable.

And tomorrow? Tomorrow we drown in shit and secretly wish this life would finally end, hiding that wish in quiet self-destruction through alcohol and stubbornness.

No nation is as unsuccessful as the Amians, and yet tries so hard to appear successful. Only an Amian will spend half his salary on Nike sneakers purely for someone else's admiration.

We are chickens, stupid chickens who cannot distinguish our own droppings from feed. We absorbed only part of the West, while our roots remain deeply Eastern. That is why we are in constant conflict. The black East refuses the transplanted organ of the West.

And yet perhaps we are right. The West did not give us a vital organ like a kidney. They gave us a dick. They gave us Mickey Mouse after twelve hours of labor in scorching heat and cotton candy after hours in a clinic waiting room to save ninety-nine cents per box of medicine."

Helen burst into laughter.

It was spontaneous - the grandmother speaking like Bonanca resembled Monty Python comedy.

What fascinated Helen most, however, was that she had finally found an example of someone so strongly affected by what clowns on television say.

But the whole Bonanca episode did not last long.

The very next day there was another program interruption - another “bug.”

Bonanca appeared again, but in a different version.

Her eyes were sunken and wet, her face covered in heavy makeup. Behind her stood a purple swastika on a light - green background - a logo designed in trendy punk style, keeping up with the times.

Next to her temple, a black barrel pressed against her skin as she began:

“Achtung, achtung!

Brothers and sisters, comrades, citizens!

Two plus two equals five. I do not say this casually, nor because someone from Room 101 threatens me. Two plus two truly equals five, and here is the proof:

$0 = 0$

$$0 \times 4 = 0 \times 5$$

Cancel the zero.

$$4 = 5$$

$$2 + 2 = 5.$$

I was very wrong to tell you everything I told you before. I admit I was drugged - mescaline and gin and tonic. A bad combination.”

She strained her eyes, squinting as if reading from an idiot board, then continued after a short pause:

“Our leader Gord and his followers will lead us into a better future where GDP grows forever and yellow flowers bloom on blue meadows. Together with our benefactress Daemona Maridal, he will guide us along the path of progress, justice, and better life, where we will all work collectively until liberation to create our future!

And don’t forget - the newest Mickey Mouse keychains are available in the nearest ‘Overeatum’ supermarkets and all Gutenberg kiosks!”

She squeezed Mickey Mouse’s plastic stomach. His eyes lit up.

From the keychain’s belly came the sound:

“Karma karma karma karma, karma chameleon...”

Helen opened her Black Notebook of Ruin and added another name:

Mickey Mouse.

That same day she went to Mauritius to find the garden gnome and strangle him until he told her where Mickey Mouse was.

Mickey Mouse must die.

“You’re looking for him too?” asked a dark-skinned man, bare-chested.

“Where is he? Where is he?!” Helen shouted hysterically. The LSD still held her. She wondered how long smoking the toad would last.

The man said his name was Adam and remarked that acid can be quite tricky. Last night at least twenty people had spoken with the gnome, and about ten had returned this morning to kill Mickey Mouse.

He drifted gently from the subject and said that today every reasonable citizen of this country has the duty to be armed to the teeth. Likewise, every serious citizen must force others to be silent for at least ten seconds. Silence means they are thinking - and that matters.

He said he was homosexual, but still searching for a woman named Eve to restore the human race after the Third World War. Artificial insemination only - no touching.

He fell silent and looked at Helen sharply.

“Are you okay?”

“Understand me,” Helen said. “I’m a member of PPS.”

“Uhhh...” he sighed. “That bad?”

“Fuck it, it’s about survival. I still don’t have a job, and I’m already losing my mind. I don’t know how long I can keep hiding...”

“Right. A capital crisis demands drastic measures. But talking about it is so dry... So what’s with this Mickey Mouse paranoia?”

“What’s with the Mickey Mouse paranoia? What’s with it?! You ask me what’s with it?! He betrayed us! We spent our childhood believing in his crystal castle and his good intentions. We believed him and then we saw the West as it truly is, but by then it was too late...”

“But it’s not Mickey’s fault. He’s a showbiz leftover. Once the industry is done with you, you can only sink into narcotics or self-destruction. Mickey is probably in rehab for gambling and alcohol right now, and his pants are in worse shape than yours,” Adam explained.

“Fine, Adam, let it be,” Helen thought as she dragged her pen across his name, leaving a dark line.

~~Mickey Mouse.~~

As she drew the line across the page, crossing out emptiness, Helen noticed another hole on her wrist.

And she understood she was slowly disappearing.

6.

A nation that, according to legend, once said “better a grave than a slave” chose to stay alive and sign the pact, no matter the cost. And so, on May eighteenth, that nation elected Vladimir Gord.

Vladimir Gord - tribute in the hands of a reliable intermediary.

Vladimir Gord - so that your money may comfortably reach the German chancellor, just as your daughters once safely reached the Ottoman harems.

The third thing you lose is common sense.

Helen seriously considered the idea of burning the Amian people - or at least part of them. She said she wanted to give them what they feared most - death itself - just so they would understand that the role of the slave they had chosen was far worse than a small bullet gently and painlessly dancing through their temples.

While fantasizing about smuggling cheap gasoline from Romania to fill her basement - keeping it ready to ignite Petitsbourg’s institutions - she received a call from Mr. Grin Koridin, king of Petitsbourg.

As a token of gratitude for her political contribution, he would grant her - gift her, rather - an entirely undeserved job in one of the small municipal companies where papers are moved from one pile to another all day long. In exchange, she only needed to serve as a parliamentary recorder.

Grin Koridin was president of Vladimir Gord's Progressive Forces Party in Petitsbourg. The unofficial owner of the city. God of big business. Emperor and deity. The man who decides everything and upon whom everything depends.

Grin Koridin is always in whichever party is in power. Within twelve hours he can transform from liberal to anti-liberal. Within forty-eight hours he can move from the Democratic Forces Party to the Progressive Forces Party.

What makes Grin Koridin invincible is that he does not expect ideology to adapt to him - he adapts to ideology. He is always polite and quiet. He has three associates - three loyal musketeers: Porthos, Aramis, and Athos - who do the dirty work while he pretends ignorance.

Half of Petitsbourg wants to kill Porthos, Athos, and Aramis. The other half is hooked on Xanax and has trouble even locating their own penis in their underwear when going to the toilet, so they are in no condition to kill anyone.

Helen once witnessed a scene in which Grin Koridin's full skill shone.

The president of the Emergency Committee used his democratic right to point out irregularities in the administration.

"Mr. Koridin, since you appointed us to the Emergency Committee, Porthos hasn't paid us a cent. We are entitled to compensation - by law and by justice!"

He appealed to something as abstract as law and justice.

“Oh, really? I wasn’t aware of that... Porthos, what’s happening there?” Koridin said, frowning.

“There was a delay in bureaucratic procedures. It will be paid in two - at most three - months,” Porthos replied.

“Good. Resolve it. I won’t allow people to wait,” Koridin said, placing a mask of compassion on his face.

The Committee president shakes the king’s hand. The king smiles, escorts him out, closes the door and waits. Two months later he removes the old president and appoints a new one. The money is never paid. Inflation and capital circulation devour it. No one can say in which aggregate state the money now exists - or where.

When Koridin meets the former president on the street, he puts on the mask: “I do not know this man.”

Grin Koridin is a master manipulator and Vladimir Gord’s closest associate.

Vladimir Gord is a master manipulator and Mammon’s closest associate.

“The main characteristic of state order in borderline republics is the rule of the professional psychopath playing the role of national savior,” Helen wrote in her Black Notebook. “Of course, professional psychopaths are not born - they are manufactured. The process resembles making Scheisse dumplings.

You ask: how are Scheisse dumplings made? The recipe is simple. Take a kilogram of horse manure, pour raw egg white over it as binding agent, and roll it in brown sugar.

Similar to making the average person from a salted banana - except that a salted banana is merely bland when you bite it. When you bite a Scheisse dumpling, the surprise is grand.”

“Before becoming German chancellor, God was a very poor cook.”

Despite her opinion of Koridin and his kind, Helen accepted the position of parliamentary recorder. She swallowed the resistance lodged in her throat and choking her conscience. She signed a Faustian contract and attended her first parliamentary session.

A recorder in parliament can witness extraordinary events. These events always occur before official sessions begin - outside public view. Eighty representatives of Gord’s Progressive Forces, together with Koridin’s inner circle, meet half an hour before each session to declare their positions. A good deputy’s position should be inaudible. But things do not always go according to plan.

Sometimes you see Deputy No. 52 trying to explain to Porthos that the people have no bread to eat.

“I don’t understand... why don’t they eat cake?” Porthos asks.

Within a month Deputy No. 52 is dismissed because a clerk “forgot” to submit the necessary paperwork to extend his mandate.

“Sorry, Comrade 52,” Koridin tells him. “You know bureaucracy - these things happen accidentally. But you are still our comrade.”

Koridin is not vindictive. He allows Deputy 52 to keep his cap with Vladimir Gord's face.

Helen once saw Grin Koridin speaking to Mickey Mouse:

“Don't worry, Mickey. It will all be resolved. You are still our comrade.”

Grin Koridin's name was written in red letters in her Black Notebook of Ruin.

The notebook, initially purposeless, became a chaotic diary filled with specific names - a list of those who had seized power for the lowest of motives, because they had no other motives. Like inquisitors, they had sentenced themselves to hell by mounting a throne that did not belong to them. What Helen did not know while condemning them in her thoughts was that they belonged only to the eighth circle of hell. The true traitors - those of the ninth circle, facing the triple gaze of evil - were the ordinary small people who allowed those creatures to rule. Petty slime, submissive souls, sellers of conscience for pennies. Always on the side of the winner - whether fascist or partisan. Those who betray themselves for a gram of comfort, worse than the worst heroin addict. Those to whom nothing matters and nothing is their problem. Calm as the Ural Mountains while every word of humanity burns around them.

Consumers. Conformists. Caligula's little court elves.

None of these ordinary people were written in her notebook - partly because Helen did not yet understand the destructiveness of ordinary neutrality, partly because there was no room for so many nameless people. Let their greatest punishment be that they are nameless, she thought - even if their nameless god loves them.

The first name in her notebook was Petra Shutjurevka, the village usurer.

By the time she added Grin Koridin, a pattern was visible.

All were impeccably dressed in expensive suits. Front-row guests at official receptions. Wine glasses held delicately by two fingers. Twenty-four “Bugo Hoss” ties in their closets. Wives named Suzana. Mistresses named Lora. Every Suzana and every Lora had collagen lips and indifferent arrogance.

They were narcissistic psychopaths marked by six traits:

First: They play with money and people until they ruin them - including themselves. Boredom is their enemy. Drugs, gambling, debts, recovery, relapse. Wiping their ass with a hundred-dollar bill. Cocaine in nose, ears, eye sockets.

Second: Complete indifference to the world. If it burns - fine. If it doesn't - fine. They do not notice the twitching of the pathetic rats bleeding beneath them.

Third: Collecting. Banks, factories, chains, hotels. They take microphones at stand-up dinners and tell jokes about their “hard work,” barely suppressing laughter.

Fourth: They crave attention. They ride Mount Sinai and preach GDP growth. Each believes he will live forever.

Fifth: Their mistresses are always named Lora. Loras are not consumers, but even worse. Loras are products. Silicone-collagen accessories worthy of a messiah riding Sinai like a cowboy.

Sixth: They rule. Smugglers of tobacco and erectile pills become PhDs overnight. Loras and Suzanas become parliamentary queens, driving humanity toward the edge of the Earth.

Helen once met a Lora wearing a seventeen-thousand-euro necklace - grotesque, filigree, heart - shaped, studded with dark zircon. From afar it resembled the testicles of a small animal.

Seventeen-thousand-euro balls.

Helen could not understand the need to hang a noose of quail diarrhea around one's neck simply because it was fashionable and expensive.

“Nothing makes you cheaper than expensive stupidity,” she wrote in her Black Notebook.

She underlined it.

After entering parliament, her notebook held thirty names. The list kept growing.

Too much shit. Too few spoons.

She often dreamed of pouring smuggled Romanian gasoline over Grin Koridin and saying:

“Don’t worry. You are still our comrade. My favorite cockroach. My dearest Scheisse dumpling.”

After entering parliament, she dreamed of dying and woke up alive and disappointed.

7.

The building where parliamentary sessions are held is magnificent - a Renaissance palace whose ancient soul weeps to be left alone. And yet, like all tedious lice of this planet, the PPS has appropriated it to stage its circus of freaks.

A fat woman.

A scarred face.

A bearded woman.

A man without a brain.

Another man without a brain.

A face from a wanted poster.

Beelzebub.

These are the people who sit in parliament and decide other people's fates.

In Amia, local government consists of deputies, and the national one of so-called senators. Senators, unlike deputies, are allowed to speak because they are well trained in the art of acting within the average parliamentary performance. Above the senators stand ministers responsible for departments dealing with trivial state problems - distracting attention from the fact that they are neither authorized, willing, nor capable of solving any real national issues.

Thus Amia has a Ministry for the Monitoring of Rural Molehill Development, a Ministry for Second-Degree Appeals on Unanswered Prayers to the Lord God, a Ministry for Recreational Table Football, and a Ministry for Counting Unemployed Adult Citizens, among others.

Still, even the local parliament must stage classical circuses similar to the national ones. Certain deputies occasionally receive the right to speak - but only certain ones, and only in accordance with their democratic-political training, so that no accidental sobriety disrupts the spectacle, much like Briggite Bonanca recently disrupted the dignity of reality television.

On her first day as parliamentary recorder, Helen witnessed a typical performance.

“Mr. Pathos, during your previous mandate you spent not three, not four, not five, but seven million on Christmas decorations for Petitsbourg - when it could have been done for far less from the budget. You speak of savings, but deeds speak louder, Mr. Pathos, deeds speak!” declared an opposition deputy.

“Horse’s ass...” muttered Pathos, trying not to be heard.

His associate, Mr. Kler, signals Helen not to record “horse’s ass”.

The Speaker of Parliament, drunk, gathers his deputies and shouts he will kill them all.

“What the fuck is wrong with you? Why are you reacting? Why did you call him a horse’s ass? You want television to film it so someone has to clean up after you?” he scolds Pathos.

“So what? A senator called a minister a horse’s ass on national TV last night,” the bearded woman interjects.

“I don’t give a fuck what a senator said. You’re not a senator. He’s not a senator. They are they, and we are we,” the Speaker snaps.

Three hours later, during recess, Porthos drinks vodka with the man who called him a thief, while that man calls him a horse’s ass. The Speaker stares at the cleavage of a new colleague trying very hard to reach bottom - because Amia celebrates bottom.

Petitsbourg is governed by people who make you wonder how they manage to dress themselves in the morning. Grin Koridin never appears. He exists only as a voice from the shadows - calm, cold, brief - exactly as every gray eminence should be. He follows the safe recipe of the Roman Empire: like Caligula, he places donkeys in all leading parliamentary positions. The donkeys cannot read; parliament becomes fiction; sessions become a freak show; autocracy unfolds behind red curtains without a hint of danger.

Teach the donkey to sign his name - rule forever.

The bearded woman asks why senator may speak but deputy may not.

“Because he knows what he’s talking about, fuck you,” the Speaker replies.

“How does he know? Yesterday he said liberal values were the work of a gay lobby destroying tradition. Today he says no state can progress without liberal values.”

“Exactly,” the Speaker concludes.

At first Helen diligently kept the parliamentary minutes.

Later she wrote a supermarket list, pretending to record matters of state importance.

After all, the Speaker does the same - looking gravely concerned about the nation's future while counting sheep - so why shouldn't a humble recorder write a grocery list?

"Ten eggs, Oyster vanilla pudding, 200 grams coconut flour."

In front of her stands Johnny, head of marketing for the PPS local branch. One meter fifty-eight tall and furious at himself for it. A size complex in every sense. Unlike his colleagues, Johnny is not a psychopath but a neurotic sadist. He summons whichever female colleague wears the most uncomfortable shoes - not by name, but with a whistle and a wave like calling a dog.

She runs.

"Paper number two," he commands.

It appears instantly.

"Could have been faster."

"Wrong paper. I said number three."

She brings number three.

“Didn’t I tell you number two? H - o - r - s - e’s ass! How hard is one paper? Cleavage under my nose and an empty head!”

His face is red. His body tense. Sweet excitement trembling in his trousers.

“Kilogram of potatoes, four cans of Lillia condensed milk, two cans of Black Fish tuna with vegetables.”

Beside Helen sits Ivan, Deputy Secretary, hands shaking like a pneumatic drill.

He pretends to drop his pen, bends, pulls out a flask, gulps vodka as if dehydrated in sub-Saharan Africa.

He began drinking when Aramis first asked him to draw a ball from a box: one red, one white. Red means prison. White means freedom. To postpone the draw, he agrees to add another red ball. Two years later the box holds two red, one white. Probability: 66.6%. Later: three red, one white. 75%.

“Quit now if you like,” Aramis says. “But do you want to throw away everything you’ve built?”

Ivan cannot sleep. Dreams of the balls chasing him. He drinks to sleep. Drinks to wake. Drinks to function.

If someone had told him then to admit his stupidity, he might have attacked them mid-session before seventeen cameras - and saved himself. But that would have been like drawing red immediately.

“500 grams chicken wings, jar of pickles, bottle of Wild Horse blackberry wine, vitamin C tablets.”

Bo Kramer, respected deputy, moves from the Traditional Forces Party to the Progressive Forces Party. He reuses the same speech - just crosses out T and writes P.

Nobody notices.

Someone from the Democratic Forces retrieves the speech from the trash, replaces P with D, and pockets it for future use.

Helen suspects Goebbels copied it from Machiavelli, who copied it from Tutankhamun III.

“Bananas, yogurt, instant coffee 5in1, lemon Crush candies.”

“Black bread, cat food, LLoid soap with mandarin scent.”

“Dish detergent, five Red Cow cans, Casie brown rice.”

“Seven kilograms of caffeine, fourteen kilograms of sugar, twenty - one kilograms of colorful additives, twenty-eight kilograms emulsifiers, thirty-five kilograms depleted

uranium, forty-two kilograms arsenic, forty-nine kilograms lead, fifty-six kilograms mercury, rat poison, and one rope 1.5 meters long strong enough to hold human weight.”

At four in the afternoon the session ends.

Helen throws her ruined grocery list into the trash.

Out of the corner of her eye she notices the Speaker watching her.

He smiles and invites her for a drink in his office - a pear brandy “sweet as honey and heavy as a hammer.”

By the time Helen drinks one shot, he has downed four.

After six or seven, he leans close and whispers a joke:

“A father worm and a son worm lived in the sewer. One day the son asks, ‘Dad, is it true some worms live in cherries, apples?’ ‘Yes, son.’ ‘Then why do we live in shit?’ ‘Because this is our homeland.’”

He laughs, spilling brandy.

He introduces himself as Andrej.

He boasts that he sat at the same table as Vladimir Gord yesterday.

He recounts a phone call Gord had - allegedly with Vladimir Putin. The conversation, according to Andrej, went something like this:

“Vovochka, so you’re alive! A real miracle.” – came from the other end of the line. It was Vladimir Putin.

“Well... yes, I’m alive. Why wouldn’t I be... I mean... is there any reason I shouldn’t be?” asked Vladimir Gord.

“Nothing in particular, just asking. You don’t answer when I call from my number, and now you answer when I call from an unknown one. Vovochka, where’s the money?”

“Well... you know, just as I was bringing the suitcase from Moscow, there was some tornado here.”

“Hmmm, if I remember geography correctly - and I do - it would seem that in Amia there hasn’t been a single tornado in the last ten billion years,” says Putin.

“What did I say, tornado? I meant volcano. A volcanic eruption.”

“Aha, I see. And what is the Amian volcano called, Vovochka?” Putin asks him.

“Aaaam... Banovo Hill?” Gord answers quickly and signals the secretary to call the publishing house that produces fifth-grade geography textbooks so they can launch a new version tonight. He quickly scribbles on paper: “The Banovo Hill volcano is located one hour’s drive from the Urals and belongs to volcanoes with high corruptive risk.” The secretary carries off the paper, and Gord waves his arms, signaling her to

come back, then hastily corrects what he wrote. Eruptive risk, eruptive! Corruption, eruption, progression, regression... remember, Vovochka, remember!

“Do you know, Vovochka, who the greatest people in the world are? Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Bakunin, Ivan Pavlov, Yuri Gagarin... all of them were Russians. Do you know, Vovochka, that after Laika the Soviets taught dogs to fly airplanes? A Russian dog learned long ago to program and is now a junior Java developer, while in your great Europe dogs still herd sheep, and in your heavenly Amia, sheep herd sheep, Vovochka! Anyway, just so you know - if Masha and the Bear ever happen to meet in the ring, feel free to put a million on Masha. By the way, Vovochka, do you know how big Russia is?”

“Big as... as mmmMoon!” Gord replies.

“Yes, as the Moon! And let me ask you again, since we’re already dealing with existential themes - do you think Russia would have grown so large if it had tolerated lies and high treason? You know that saying, ‘Stalin raised you, but he didn’t raise you enough’...”

“Alright, come on, let’s not exaggerate right away,” Gord muttered. “You know, I had to give the guys that money, stress is killing them, they need a bit of... you know, some starlets, a little vacation... the guys need to relax, what the hell. Who’s going to work for us if not the guys... the people won’t, you can’t keep roasting them for that long without a break, some kind of conditioned reflex forms, fuck knows...”

“What the hell do they need starlets for now? They have bots.”

“Technically, the thing with the bots is a bit... well... to be precise, nobody wants to screw a bot so its gears don’t fall apart,” Gord replies.

“What are you talking about? Didn’t I give you money to modernize those bots, electronics and touch screens - what gears are you talking about?”

“Well, I didn’t change them, that is we, that is not me, but those before me, the democrats, they’re to blame because they didn’t change spare parts since ’99. So the bots are on a mechanism, mechanical, they have a winding wheel. You know, rusty. They have to be lubricated with Vaseline.”

“Wait, wait, all your bots are mechanical? And journalists?” Putin asks.

“All of them. Spinners, bloggers, journalists, marketing analysts.”

“I’ll be damned if I don’t damn you...”

“Hey, wait, my friend, tavarish, благодетель, don’t be like that, we’ll fix it,” whines Vladimir Gord.

From the other end of the line comes: “Tuuuu... tu tuuu...”

Gord, says Andrej, hurried off to Germany to resolve that small incident just as the latter was about to present him with the problem of small-town communication technology. The problem was as follows: it is well known that Amia’s technical and technological progress did not exactly follow the usual European course. As a result, the following situation occurred: Amia is the only country in the world that still sends international reports by smoke signals from a hill. Luckily, international communication codes are the same whether you use microcomputers or wave burning dry straw, so the entire system still functions. Now, the main problem of Petitbourse is that most municipal Wartburgs and Moskviches are falling apart, so they have no way to climb the hill to send the signal. It was precisely this problem that the

president of the assembly - or Andrej, as he asked Helen to address him - was trying to solve.

“Why are you getting upset!” she laughed. “We have horse - drawn vehicles.”

“There are two little problems there,” said Andrej, lowering his head. “The first is certainly that no one will want to lose an entire day climbing some mountain without being paid for it.”

“That’s not a problem,” Helen replied instantly. “There’s the party youth - they work for a promise, even for one that will never be fulfilled.”

“Well, you see, the second thing is closely connected to another interesting phone conversation. It all began when Gord tried to reach an agreement with the German chancellor...”

As Andrej claimed, Gord was first answered by a secretary: “Good afternoon, you have reached the Third Reich, I am your operator Klara, how may we help you... biiip...”

“I would like to speak... biiip... what is this, damn it, it’s just beeping...” Gord commented.

“After the sound signal leave a message. To hear in English press 2.”

In a fit of intense rage, to which he was otherwise prone, Gord began pressing seven twos one after another and then the other keys on the keypad, only to discover that, quite by accident, he had entered a secret code. From the other end of the line, the voice of the German chancellor was heard.

“Guten Morgen!”

“Guten guten, du hast” Gord whispered tenderly, listening as the German chancellor handed the receiver to her deputy and said: “Kleine Vladimir, not the real Vladimir, the other one. Get him off my back.”

The deputy took the receiver and politely replied: “Guten Morgen, Mr. Gord, how may we help you?”

“I was wondering... a loan or some postponement...” Gord muttered.

The deputy consulted with the chancellor, slightly moving the receiver away from herself. “Nein, I Europe, he slave. He owe me money. Nein!”

“Madam humbly apologizes, but at the moment she is unable to allocate a sum that would satisfy both you and your country, and we would not wish you to feel humiliated by agreeing to anything less than what you deserve, and therefore under these inadequate circumstances we would not detain you any longer...” the deputy spoke mechanically.

In any case, it seems that even Gord himself did not remember how he managed to prolong the conversation, but it is possible that the key words were “link,” “Moscow,” and “ten percent.” The chancellor promised him assistance, though not in money but in goods, and German garbage soon arrived in Amia. These were DolceGabbana jeans made in Washington D.C., arriving by charter flight via the Vatican. Of course, it quickly turned out that the jeans were made in China, that is, the PRC, and that they bore the label DolceBananna, which was actually an unintentional printing error by a tired Asian worker, but the Amian people did not interpret it that way. Instead, it was understood as a subliminal message from the Illuminati about the banana-ization of the state, and the people foamed with rage. The jeans remained unsold, there was no

money to feed the horses, and thus certain cities of Amia were left without both harness and horses. Putin stepped in here as well to help, but medically it is impossible to bring a horse back from the dead, while for magic it was already too late.

Andrej had already stopped counting the shots of pear brandy that were scorching his tongue. For a while he smiled silently, then pulled a piece of some official - looking paper out of his pocket. It was a document Helen certainly should not yet be seeing, but since he found her charming, he would let her in on a few small secrets of the political craft. What he held in his hand was the Dictionary of “Neoliberal Political Economy for Beginners”, intended mostly for senators and members of parliament who had proven their obedience and loyalty to the party.

Helen did not belong to that privileged group, but she was charming, and the dictionary, in its full strength and potency, stood before her like some ancient recipe for a magical Gallic potion. She read carefully, absorbing every word:

Dictionary of Neoliberal Political Economy for Beginners – Most Important Terms

Introductory notes: words marked with st.n. indicate old-people's words that must be removed from use. Old-people's words are replaced with words marked with the abbreviation neo.e., that is, the new-economic vocabulary. Since the economy cannot be separated from the sphere of politics - which is why we mostly call it political economy, at least in the macroeconomic, and more recently increasingly in the microeconomic sense - this dictionary may be taken as a universal manual for neoliberal economists and politicians of the democratic European current in colonized countries.

Feudalization (st.n.) – Feudalism is the name of a social relation that prevailed in the Middle Ages. The feudal lord or landowner is the successor of the slave owner in slave-owning societies. Serfs, successors of slaves, worked on the estates of feudal lords who enriched themselves on others' backs. Feudalization is the process of turning former socialist states into feudal states, with the aim of enriching individuals. Alternatively, feudalization is the process of turning time backwards.

Translation into neo.e. – economic reforms

Bribe (st.n.) – the basic tool of work in the illegal use of social position or influence aimed at gaining benefit for the individual in office.

Translation into neo.e. – working capital

Looting (st.n.) – Seizing and appropriating someone else's property, labor, or value.

Translation into neo.e. – initial capital accumulation

Threat (st.n.) – A process by which an individual is forced to do something against their will, driven by fear that their existence will be endangered.

Translation into neo.e. – constructive criticism

Mercenary (st.n.) – A person who sells themselves to anyone for a certain fee, a whore, a politician, Grin Koridin.

Translation into neo.e. – human resource

Beheading (st.n.) – The process of overthrowing the ruling caste in a state or company and replacing one totalitarian autocratic group with another.

Translation into neo.e. – democratic elections, American liberation, standardization

Dismissal (st.n.) – violent seizure of a workplace from a person dependent on their salary without resolving their existential question in another way, abuse through poverty, violence against people.

Translation into neo.e. – austerity measures

Liar (st.n.) – A person who sells snake oil, a psychopathological syndrome with elements of imagination, a person who relatively skillfully uses words to gain certain benefit or avoid punishment, a slimeball, a coward.

Translation into neo.e. – spinner, blogger, influencer, journalist

Domestic traitor (st.n.) – A person who sells the state and the people for the sake of an account in a Cypriot bank and Swiss citizenship.

Translation into neo.e. – The best European

Mafioso (st.n.) – A criminal in a suit and tie.

Translation into neo.e. – businessman, entrepreneur, boss

Note: The abridged edition includes only the most common and most necessary expressions. Usage suitable and desirable for beginners and in situations of essential first aid. The extended edition for senators and ministers available upon request.

Andrej also explained to Helen the way these words can become part of the everyday vocabulary of a person who, professionally or recreationally, deals with politics.

Helen reads carefully.

The dictionary stands before her like an ancient recipe for a magic potion.

And she understands something essential:

The circus is not chaos.

It is choreography.

Andrej kept edging his face - and his curious fingers - closer to Helen Weiss's, preparing to babble even more "neo - political" theories, but the game was interrupted by none other than Aramis.

Noticing what was happening, Aramis angrily ordered Andrej to stop talking, flailing his hands and signaling that such behavior was unacceptable.

Helen shrugged, poured herself another shot of pear brandy, and drank it in one gulp. Feeling the pleasant rush of drunkenness right on the border of dizziness, she decided it was time to leave - before more papers, jokes, or suitors surfaced from the dark pockets of state administration and angered the gods.

Bakunin once said that freedom without socialism is privilege and injustice, and that socialism without freedom is slavery and brutality. Vladimir Gord, in cooperation with the Mickey Mouse empire, therefore decided to build a state without socialism and without freedom.

That day, in the spirit of the state's fashionable descent into the rabbit hole, the great magician of modern political marketing, Josef Goebbels, was visiting Petitbourg.

The PPS organized itself flawlessly to welcome its marketing idol.

"What a great and noble man," Aramis said, adding that there was much to learn from him.

"Learn what exactly? Torture? Mass murder?" Helen asked.

"You should not say things like that. The historical circumstances were different back then."

"Jesus Christ, it is Goebbels."

"Stop talking. That is not smart."

Aramis, like all of Koridin's musketeers, liked to keep things under control. He had the peculiar habit of telling others on which shoulder a handbag should be carried, and his opinion on lipstick shades or shirt colors had to be respected. A certain inferiority

complex - the need to be perceived as educated when he clearly was not - made him unbearably exhausting. Even the most disciplined zen defenses collapsed under the assault of his tragic marketing advice, advice he himself never followed. The only ancient maxim he respected was that law is merely an elegant hurdle on a racetrack: something every well-trained horse is expected to jump over.

Koridin's guard resembled the old royal guard in one crucial way: dirty hands hidden behind speeches about loyalty and honor. They washed brains with trivialities like shirt colors and lipstick shades. The difference lay in the slogan. Instead of "all for one and one for all," Koridin's musketeers believed in "all against one and one against all." Combined with the visit of a Europeanized fascist like Josef Goebbels, such circumstances poisoned the air with the premonition of yet another bloody era in world history.

The audience gathered to hear the celebrated Goebbels consisted mostly of PPS members who, rewarded with power, had to demonstrate mass support, obedience, and loyalty. Seating was strictly hierarchical: respectable officials with elegant ties in the front rows, everyone else behind them.

Had Aldous Huxley lived to witness a social order in which so-called Epsilon minus ruled over Alpha, he would have sat by his fireplace and burned *Brave New World* page by page. His disappointment would have surpassed even that of Thomas More. The utopian at least knows he dreamed his utopia. The dystopian can only shake his head and admit that even the dark imagination of Huxley or Orwell failed to anticipate this particular deformation of civilization.

At exactly 12:00, the magician of free Europe's political marketing stepped onto the stage.

He was thin, anemic, hands laced with blue veins. Short, sharply boned face. Hollow eyes twisting in a failed attempt at emotion. Then he returned to his default state - expressionless psychopathic numbness. He stood like an iceberg, gaze fixed somewhere between the audience and the sky. Rigid. Mechanical. Inhuman. Abrupt movements, blank eyes, stiff posture, no trace of fear or surprise in his brows - the portrait of a textbook psychopath.

He lifted his head slightly and began.

"I do not know how many millions are listening to me on the radio tonight. I wish to speak to you from the depths of my heart to the depths of yours. I believe the entire nation has a passionate interest in what I have to say. I will therefore speak with the seriousness and openness that this moment demands."

Thunderous applause.

"From its very beginnings, our movement has confronted and overcome numerous crises. Our Union acts decisively when facing danger. We do not bury our heads in the sand. We are brave enough to look danger in the eye, to take measures, and to act with our heads held high. Our movement and our Union have always been ready for fanatical measures when necessary, for strength of character when obstacles must be overcome, for determination to achieve our goal, for iron hearts prepared for any internal or external struggle. So it shall be today."

More applause.

"They say the people have lost faith in victory. I ask you - do you believe with us in the total victory of the European people? Are you ready to follow the Union to victory and bear the heaviest personal burdens for a better tomorrow? Are you willing to

work ten, twelve, even fourteen hours a day until our final triumph? Do you approve, if necessary, measures against black - market workers who exploit the nation's needs for selfish gain?"

The applause did not stop.

Helen stood up.

"I need the restroom," she muttered, and slipped out through the back door.

Goebbels did not notice. Porthos did. He watched her with a frown sharpened by revenge.

She walked faster. Then faster still. Panic tightening around her like a vacuum chamber filled with helium and nitrogen. One door led to the PPS waiting room. Another to a long corridor. The fourth finally opened to freedom.

Bright sky beneath the heavy handle of the old baroque building.

She ran.

Deep, violent breaths. A tingling in her calves told her she had gone far enough.

These people were dangerous. No longer just clowns and fools. They were clowns and fools with power.

Masses accept such governments for one simple reason: they want civilization maintained at a level that allows them to work as little and think as little as possible. To conclude that the masses are stupid for voting the way they do is naïve. The masses are a specific organism. They enthrone the one most like themselves - the one who understands their petty, shameful impulses they dare not voice aloud. Thus they elect the greatest idiots, precisely those who will destroy the very civilization they cherish - to such an extent that eighteenth-century village life will sound like poetry compared to labor in the companies of those idiots and their privileged investors.

Helen bought a liter of strong homemade brandy and went home determined to drink in broad daylight, like most Petitbourse's officials and managers.

The brown liquor burned down a transparent teacup. She swallowed it by force, shuddering. A thin white cigarette followed.

Cheap spirit can only be washed down with more cheap spirit.

One more.

And another.

Her eyelids softened. Life became tolerable again.

She tried to imagine something else - a rainbow, daisies, a John Lennon song - but instead she saw wooden crates of machine guns loaded at night by bribed Colombian men onto ships flying American flags.

Perhaps it was just residue from some forgotten Hollywood thriller.

Perhaps not.

She thought about self-sufficiency. About retreating into nature. Before defeat - or after. Because, sincere battles always end in defeat.

Real revolutions are preempted by wars. If war fails to restore order, rulers stage a failed revolution to drown the oppressed in collective depression. And the worst part is belonging to the same foolish people you judge.

Writing seemed useless. No one reads. Soon everything will burn - books, formulas, patents, notes. Humanity will mold clay pots again and write a new Epic of Gilgamesh, which everyone will abandon the moment someone reinvents television and nudity. Humanity will once again make vessels out of clay and will write a new Epic of Gilgamesh, which everyone will stop reading once someone invents television and nudity on it again. There is no more futile task than to write even a single word in such a time of leaden sky across which black ominous birds fly.

Knowing this, Helen had nothing left but to look through the window. and, from a sad distance, observe the energy of summer that filled with joy all those young people dancing on the asphalt and drinking beer.

And in their green hearts, somewhere far, far away from her, in full strength and happy ignorance, the life of blossoming summer and future memories was swelling.

9.

White mulberries and tiny green bugs fell from the mulberry tree in the garden of "Mauritius." The evening was pleasant. The whole garden smelled of crushed mulberry fruit, freshly lit grass, and tobacco.

Helen sat and looked at the sky, clear and smooth as a mirror. Adam stared at a single point. From time to time he lifted his hands and brought a cheap plastic horn to his lips. He blew into it as if trying to produce music, but the only sound was a steady, hopeless "wuuuuu." This did not stop him from improvising, or from singing now and then:

"I look at the sky, centuries pass by,
Memories of old, the only cure, oh my..."

If postmodernism were a horror film, it would begin with exactly this scene.

"You're still blowing into that horn?" Helen asked.

"I blow, I sing. What else should I do?" Adam said.

"But you were doing that three days ago," she laughed. "The way someone leaves you, that is how they find you."

"Of course. I'm a consistent man," Adam said, and brought the horn to his lips again.

"Wuuuuu."

A philosophy student sitting with Helen and Adam wore a T - shirt with Karl Marx printed in strip - art style. Under Karl Marx it said: "Remember remember, the 7th November." Next to him sat a man who had already pulled sanitizer from his pocket for the fifth time and wiped his hands.

"The world is dirty," he said. "The world is a slimy, sweaty shelter for germs and pests."

Helen asked him if he knew what the dirtiest thing in the world was.

"A hookah mouthpiece," the man said. "A mouthpiece used by more than five people contains over a hundred kinds of bacteria."

"Reasonable," Helen said. "But no. The dirtiest thing in the world is a hundred - dollar bill. It carries millions of bacteria, scabies mites, hepatitis virus, bedbugs, cockroaches, and heavy metals. And every day we love it, pet it, kiss it, and keep it under our pillows - the dirtiest thing in the world. The one thing nobody has ever told 'no' carries at least a hundred germs on every millimeter of its body, and just as many tiny mites and toxic compounds."

The man stared at her as if she had stabbed him in the thigh.

"I'm going to die," he said.

"Then die," Adam said. "Who gives a damn? Die."

Adam hated any situation with too much realism. For Adam, a little reality was already too much reality. That was why he surrounded himself with people who lived in fantasy.

Why Adam's relationship with fantasy was so complicated was hard to say. Love for dreams can be so strong - unbelievably strong - obsessively strong. In dreams there are twice as many colors, the sky is always smooth as ice on a frozen lake, and beauty does not rot.

Adam, of course, was one of those ridiculous idealists who believed in beauty - a living embodiment of that revolting sentence about beauty saving the world, the sentence Dostoevsky spilled without understanding what avalanche of horror it would unleash.

Art must not be beautiful. Art must be not beautiful.

That was what Helen believed.

Adam believed something else entirely. A Buddhist and a Christian could reach agreement more easily than Adam and Helen, because every god - Buddhist, Christian, or otherwise - is a different name for the same concept. Here there was no shared concept at all. Here there was only Helen's desire to push the world into the abyss of metamorphosis, and the world's stubborn resistance.

And in the end perhaps it did not matter. Perhaps only to her did Adam resemble the world. Perhaps there was nothing worldly in him at all. His life - even more than the lives of other Petitbourg citizens - could be compressed into a book of Eastern wisdom titled *The Monk Who Never Owned a Ferrari, and Was Not Even a Monk*.

Watching Adam as if he were the world, Helen did not notice that the new world sat directly across from her, wearing Karl Marx on his chest. The new world was clean and young. He had read many books about dialectical materialism and the collective unconscious. And yet his inexperience with the nature of the psychopaths he fought produced a bitter, cold fear.

Helen left "Mauritius" quickly. A mind clouded by a few too many brandies could no longer absorb the underground neuroses every punk rat-hole is full of.

But the garden gnome from "Mauritius" - the one she had once spoken to on acid - followed her. He slipped into her yard. He appeared at her door as if summoned by the crack in reality itself.

"Mickey Mouse is dead," the gnome told her. "All of you will die. You will die in an armchair in front of a television, watching the seventy - sixth episode of Poirot for the fifth rerun."

"And why should I care?" Helen asked. "What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing. I'm just panicking."

"I see no reason to panic," Helen said. "That's just a death. It's not as if we're talking about disappearance. Besides, what is wrong with me? Why am I talking to lifeless, nameless objects?"

"Excuse me, madam. Who is nameless here? My name is Gnome. Garden Gnome." He straightened as if he wore epaulettes. "I once spoke with Nietzsche, you know. I told him, 'Friedrich Nietzsche, if God was born in the mind, then in the mind he must

also die. If you truly wished to kill him, you would forget him. By repeating that he is dead, you keep him alive - and you do that because you want him alive. Because if he is dead, you know you are dead too."

Then he went on, warming to his own monologue.

"I spoke to Eliot Ness as well. I told him, 'When history rewrites reality, a pawn of the state mafia that wins the street war becomes a hero who defeated evil. Nobody will ask why the greater evil defeated the lesser, or why evil was defeating evil at all. The important thing is to sing about heroes, even false ones.'"

"And I told that Russian Vladimir that perestroika began long before Gorbachev. It began when everyone was trading Marx and Engels Street in a Slavic version of Monopoly, and nobody saw any contradiction. And then the fatal eggs began to hatch - with a small 'outside' help in the form of an incubator..."

"Did you talk to Baron Munchausen too?" Helen asked.

"To him as well, to him as well! He isn't mangy. I spoke even more to the lucky ones history did not remember. Because, madam Weiss, history is a great grudge-keeper."

"All right, Gnome, all right. What do you want from me?" Helen was getting tired.

"According to the Law on Civil Servants, section three, article twenty - seven, paragraph two, which states that everyone has the right to choose and to be chosen into the ark..." the gnome babbled.

"What ark? What are you talking about?"

"What do you mean what ark? Noah's ark. Or, under the new standards, Gnoah's Ark. I am the gnome in charge of ark standardization this year. I must select the best of each species and push them into a bunker in case of apocalypse, so that the best survive. Biblical eugenics, that is what this is about, madam."

"Selection hasn't begun yet. I'm still building the theory. It is still quite poor. Most of the time I feel a little like Charles Darwin, a little like a Catholic missionary. But I would like to run some tests, if you agree to assist me."

"So I need to be a lab rat?" Helen asked.

"You could put it that way."

"Fine," Helen said. "I wasn't planning to do anything intelligent today. To be precise, I wasn't planning to do anything intelligent for the next ten years, but fine."

"Wonderful, madam, wonderful. You need only look at this screen with your deepest concentration and give me an interpretation of what you see. Short, long, dark, drunk, psychedelic, written in letters or numbers - whatever you wish. Just look at the screen."

Helen opened her eyes wide and fixed her gaze on the thin cardboard where moving images danced. The first thing she saw was the title "Looney Tunes" and the familiar melody of childhood. Circular layers appeared. Then the title "Merrie Melodies." The cartoon began.

The first cartoon - Jungle Jitters (Looney Tunes, 1938) - took place in an African village. Its main subject was a tribe resembling the Mursi, except with obvious cannibal culinary habits. A traveling salesman arrived to sell them blenders and vacuum cleaners.

"Allow me to present the latest achievement in household management, pure stainless steel, modeled according to the newest formula..." he repeated his corporate mantra while the villagers tried to boil him alive.

Hearing the commotion, their queen Minoha - pale-skinned, with eyeglasses - demanded to be informed. The salesman was pulled from the cauldron and brought before Minoha, where he proudly demonstrated a self-sustaining stainless-steel toaster, modeled according to the newest formula. Only when Minoha put on a wedding dress and produced a Catholic priest did the salesman understand what awaited him. He voluntarily climbed back into the cauldron.

The end.

Helen cleared her throat, thought for a moment, and began to write. In large letters she wrote: "Cartoon One - Interpretation." Under that, like a subtitle: "The cannibal structure of anarcho-capitalism and corporate identity as a reliable substitute for personal identity." Then, under the subtitle of the subtitle, she added: "They invent a system where people become commercialists and traveling salesmen, then they say Tito was bad, Fidel was a dictator, Chavez this, Mao that."

She left a two-finger space and wrote the introduction:

Here we must see, on one side, the savagery of the uncivilized world, set against the white world of progress, technique, and technology, for the purpose of easy humor

aimed, again, at the white man. The African man would not understand this humor - at least not before the first shock - transition and Europeization, and even after that it is questionable how funny he would find the attempt to portray him as the savage.

What we truly see is the astonishing creativity of a tribe in seven short minutes, contrasted with the white salesman who repeats spectacularly stupid sentences he learned at a seminar on corporate identity.

We conclude that the modern mode of labor has regressed civilization as an idea so far that humanity would need to go back three millennia and begin construction from scratch. Otherwise the cannibal essence of corporate identity will devour man until there is no soul left, only a parrot repeating, at correct intervals, the proven mantras of stainless steel, newest formula, most efficient technology, absolute savings, and quality.

As Huxley observed, a man under such conditions cannot remain mentally healthy, even with Xanax and unlimited sex.

Thus direct torture under autocracy has been replaced by indirect democratic torture, where the torturer is invisible and collective. The torturer does not even intend to hurt personally. He is so polite and full of understanding that he wishes to help the man to adapt to the parrot stage.

Because the torturer seems to have only the best intentions, the victim begins to suspect he invented the threat to his own personality. He only needs to surrender to technical-technological progress and let it save him from cannibal savagery - by eating him.

The images dissolved into the familiar melody. The second cartoon began.

Cartoon Two - Hamateur Night (Merrie Melodies, 1939). Amateur night. A fox recited Hamlet while dodging tomatoes. An Indian magician placed a volunteer in a basket and stabbed it with a saber. Romeo and Juliet - actually a rooster and a hen - melted the moon with their kisses until an annoying laugh interrupted from the audience: "huahuahuahua." Romeo took a revolver and shot the laughing nuisance, returned to kiss Juliet, and from her sweet beak came the same: "huahuahuahua." The curtain fell. A pianist appeared. A talking dog. The show was repeatedly disrupted by an annoying Dimwit trying to sing "Coming 'Round the Mountain," until the writers pushed him offstage.

At the end, the audience voted for the winner. Naturally, neither Romeo nor Juliet nor Hamlet received the votes. By an overwhelming majority, the Dimwit won. The camera pulled up to show the audience was composed of hundreds of identical Dimwits.

Plot explained.

Helen grabbed her pen and scribbled: "Easy. Cartoon Two is an election campaign." Then she left space and wrote more neatly:

Cartoon Two compresses the entire essence of parliamentary elections and pre-election campaigns into seven minutes, with a devastating conclusion: quality is irrelevant. The people always elect the one most similar to themselves. In this case, the Dimwit.

That is why the communist dictator in Slavic countries resembles the capitalist dictator, no matter how different the ideologies appear. Yet we should treat this

conclusion cautiously, because the communist and the capitalist dictator may be the same person.

Digression: In socialist Yugoslavia, which claimed to be an atheist state, the national anthem contained the phrases "the abyss of hell" and "curse" - directly religious concepts - while novels like *The Master and Margarita* were undesirable. Consider whether contradiction killed the old socialism, and consider how easily a similar system could be implemented again, if only for the noble goal of abolishing all election campaigns until further notice.

Digression Two: Solzhenitsyn received the Nobel Prize for his novels about the gulag. He was not rewarded for art, but for giving the West a brilliant business idea. It would be a shame for such a productive vision of labor camps to die with the USSR or German National Socialism, so democratic America and the same corporate Europe assume the heavy burden of continuing the tradition. Naturally, they continue it where it began - in the East. Consider temporary measures that might save the Slavic East - for example, constant election campaigns. Bribing the people before elections might reduce the starvation the Vladimir Gord regime is attempting, if idiocy does not outpace hunger.

Digression Three: From these digressions we conclude we should forget both election campaigns and both failed systems. Consider a green, eco-anarcho-communism - but be careful with the green. If you force the people to eat too much arugula or broccoli, they will revolt no matter how utopian the system is. Therefore the green requires a little of the good old red.

Digression Four: Implementing any system is not a job for an ordinary person, and especially not for a woman so lost she cannot even be part of "the small group of people that can change the world." Therefore one must move to Norway, where democratic socialism - or social democracy, whatever those words mean - functions successfully. And this is not about oil. Russia has oil and still lives in the same filth as

Amia. This is about Norway not pretending to be an empire. Therefore Norway becomes a "small man" - content in a forest house with a fishing rod. Russia, however, is burdened with being an idol to colonized nations. When those nations realize the emptiness of corporate ideology, they will go mad and begin killing each other unless they turn to another idol, and thus another ideal. If you are Russia, consider offering a truly better ideology to a world turned into a clockwork orange, rather than competing with the West in the art of wrapping fog in beautiful paper. If, thank God, you are not Russia, hope you are not America either. It is best to be Norway, or to be in Norway, and not stir the global stew. Madagascar is acceptable in the same context.

The next cartoon - Mickey Mouse, The Mad Doctor (1933) - was simple and slightly banal. Good old Mickey Mouse, the symbol of the American dream, had his dog Pluto kidnapped by an evil reflexologist. The doctor intended experiments. Suddenly Mickey woke up. It had all been a nightmare.

Happy end.

Cartoon Three - Interpretation: The Mad Doctor is Ivan Pavlov. The cartoon reveals America's primal fear of Russian progress, neutralized through mockery. The mockery is discreet, suggesting a cold war. When the war turns hot, mockery becomes direct and the blows get low.

Author's note: consider that the conditioned reflex was discovered not by starving dogs, but by feeding them.

Second note: move to Norway before interesting times begin to breed and nurse great, exceptional, and miserable people.

The next cartoon - Mickey and the Beanstalk (1947) - retold the fairy tale of Jack and the beanstalk, except Jack was Mickey Mouse. To save himself and his friends from starvation, he decided to sell a cow, but a stranger tricked him and sold him magic beans. How beans can be magic remains unclear, just as it is unclear how stones can be precious.

In any case, the beans proved to be a path to another world where a rich giant lived. The giant owned a hen that laid golden eggs - presumably the source of his wealth. The hen was an endless revenue stream, a capitalist perpetuum mobile: a good business idea plus the force needed to enforce it. Such a hen would solve all financial problems for Mickey and company. Mickey saw no other way to survive except to steal it. After that, Mickey and company lived happily ever after.

Interpretation: Disney is clearly alluding to primitive accumulation. If Mickey Mouse symbolizes corporate America, then America's initial capital was acquired through theft. Mickey and company could not revolt against the government that starved them. They had to seek happiness in other countries and in other people's property.

If we add realism, it is likely that when Mickey went to sell the cow, he was recruited by a military - intelligence agency and sent to Afghanistan or some other overseas land rich in oil. No magic beans at all. But let's stick to the story.

If we take a subliminal view, we see the cartoon industry frightening children with communism early: rich peasants Mickey, Donald, and Goofy will become poor peasants because the state will seize all their grain to fund centralized industrialization - an allusion to the Holodomor.

But the essence is the golden hen. It is the capitalist holy grail - a sewer creature that eats berries and shits pure gold. It returns us to the oldest question: which came first, the hen or the egg. Which is the same as: how did the world begin. Which is the same

as: how did primitive accumulation actually occur. Do not be fooled. These three questions are one question.

Who robbed whom first. Greece or Egyptians. Romans or Christians. Christians or Romans. Europe or its colonies. Nazis or Stalinists. The West or the East. In truth it comes down to who first stole the axe, the clay pot, the mammoth hide. The first class inequality in history began with the first robbery, the first accumulation. That was when the golden era of capital began. That was when the hen that lays the most valuable eggs was born.

And now it belongs to the Clinton state, whose roof is propaganda instead of culture, whose foundation is stolen corn - no matter how elegantly it frames theft as harvesting the fruit of nobody's land.

The fifth cartoon - One Froggy Evening (Merrie Melodies, 1955) - inspired Helen most. A poor construction worker discovered a singing frog in an old shoebox. The problem was that the frog sang only in front of him. When he tried to show it to others and profit from its talent, it behaved like an ordinary frog and drove him insane. The frog was named Michigan J. He wore a tuxedo, a top hat, and held a cane while singing, "Hello my baby, hello my honey..." The man ended up in a psychiatric hospital, returned the frog to where he found it, and the cycle repeated in the future when another unlucky worker discovered Michigan J. Frog.

Yes, very inspiring. Helen titled her interpretation: "Portrait of the Artist Through the Door of Perception, or Why Bulgakov Really Got Hooked on Morphine," and wrote:

Every person who fights must know his life's work is a Michigan J. frog. Whatever you create, no one will see its value. No one cares. Even if someone cared, they could not recognize value. The response to the creator's bloody labor depends on a small group of people warming their asses on the stoves of imperial comfort and consuming

substances. Their reaction depends on the trip, and on whether the hashish met expectations.

If your work makes them laugh while they are high, you receive value and a barcode. Otherwise, you can go to hell, along with your frog. Most never receive a barcode worth enough to buy a modest farm and feed chickens. Most creators are sucked into the urban whirlpool of attempts and failures, employed in accounting offices, miserable to the bone. After eleven or twelve hours of pushing numbers or capping yogurt bottles on a conveyor belt, it is no wonder that the meaning of life becomes a frog singing, "Hello my baby, hello my honey, hello my ragtime gal..."

Only a fool cannot see the emperor's new clothes. And yet the homeless man is mocked for being naked. In the end, whether the public calls you a genius or a schizophrenic who hallucinates singing frogs depends only on whether you are an emperor or a homeless man.

Digression One: My frog sings:

"A year ago we had a car,
But the pigs ate half of it, ha - ha - ha,
Because we love insane speed,
We bought ourselves a Wartburg limousine..."

Digression Two: Every creator has a particular escape. Bulgakov had morphine. Huxley had LSD. Van Gogh had ear - cutting. Gauguin had Tahiti. Most fascinating are those who used deprivation, including celibacy. Modern history does not remember them as significant, though they are the only ones who could give the individual mind a recipe for survival in collective madness. They wake in dead silence, in a damp bed, after a dream of ecstasy - a dream released from the chains of consciousness and its limiting fears - and they understand that only physical escape

from this quasi-civilization liberates. Cocaine trance and acid trip are hallucinations. As soon as the effect wears off, a cynical bat leans over your head and whispers, quoting Pelevin, that creators are not needed here for anything at all.

Digression Three:

"Wartburg limousine has five gears,
It makes a lot of smoke and the wheel shakes,
And where there's smoke there's fire, of course,
Jesus Christ, the engine is on fire..."

Helen laughed at herself.

The next cartoon - Betty Boop, Poor Cinderella (1934) - was a Cinderella replica with Betty Boop in the lead. It was so dry that Helen could not focus on anything except Betty's head shaped like a warped television box and her tiny dark - painted mouth, performing to exhaustion. Watching Betty Boop gave Helen one single thought.

Amia.

Interpretation: Amia was the first association that surged into the mind while watching a cartoon about a stupid, naive girl who has no idea what to do with herself, to the point of meaninglessness. Amia is a Betty Boop state.

It is easy to mumble about some Buddhist river of insight where the individual floats out of everyday life, but the individual is not capable of insight inside so much collective collapse. Today is the final stage of capitalism, when the "middle class"

disappears not only among people but among states. There is only empire and its colonies.

This is not only the crisis of capital. It is the crisis of the state, and most interestingly, the crisis of authority. Authority has lost legitimacy - even inside the imperial castle - not as a person or a form, but as a concept. It has become clear there is no form of power, party, man, or superhero capable of restoring trust in the idea of power itself.

Frequent replacements and the total loss of ideology have not produced a change in popular will, but the total collapse and absence of popular will. A schizoid stage of depression, where everything is equally irrelevant, spread like a virus. The ruling structures rule not by manipulating the masses - because even a fool sees the masses no longer suck that story - but by manipulating individuals. Specifically, party members. Each individual is promised what he wants, in exchange for forming a small mass not united by a noble ideology but by personal promises that each petty interest will be satisfied. Naturally, no party ever fulfills those promises.

Each party only stains your name, binds your hands, and makes you forever a former PPS member, even if tomorrow you would give your life for the noblest cause.

Fortunately, midnight strikes on Cinderella's clock. Humanity loses the illusion that a beautiful dress can save it from the demon of devouring interest rates. Power can no longer deceive. Power is losing.

Do not be fooled - power will not surrender gently. Narcissistic psychopaths will create total chaos rather than compromise. And do not be fooled: the intervals between world wars did not grow because humanity became smarter, but because technological progress slowed the process between scum taking power and mass hunger becoming the direct consequence of scum-rule. No one is wise until it is too late.

The essence of every social order is this: the individual adapts to the collective as long as he can endure it psychologically; after that, the collective adapts to the individual. If we apply this to today, a new economic thought emerges whose central slogan is that there is no economy at all.

How to help collective Amia, or even the individual inside Amia, remains an open question. The most accurate answer is: you cannot.

The great sacrifice of the individual will not occur as it did in old communism - suppressing freedom for material welfare, sacrificing art for bread - but as the sacrifice of both art and bread. That will be the final triumph of capital. Or, to supplement Marx's axiom that the last capitalist we will hang is the one who sold us the rope, add this: the rope seller and the rope buyer will be the same person.

The screen went dark. Helen exhaled. She was tired. Her concentration was failing.

The gnome noticed and began writing something in his official notes. Helen lit a cigarette.

"Tired?" the gnome asked.

"A little," she said. "Though I find all this immensely entertaining."

"These are serious matters," the gnome frowned. "If serious matters entertain you, perhaps you are not the right person for our team."

"Are you trying to tell me something?" Helen asked.

The gnome pulled a white rolling paper from his pocket, compressed a bit of magic into it with the tip of a pen, lit it, and passed it to Helen. Then he continued.

"Look. Your answers are too innovative. According to my neo-Darwinian theory, 'Noah's Ark, Inc.' would be threatened at its foundation by that innovation. Imagine a system where everyone has enough food and sleep, and it requires only a little work, say six hours, and then someone like you comes along and starts talking about red-green coalitions and does not even worry that someone will take such nonsense seriously."

"That would force moves our corporation is trying to avoid. For example, we'd have to unlock Stalin's gulags again, but then we'd look repressive. If we did it the other way, moving everyone else away from you into Albanian bunkers, we'd be accused of suppressing freedom and spreading paranoia. In short, you'd multiply the idiots who take you seriously. They'll cry about pressure and mumble about freedoms until they rebuild liberal democracy, and from there - as the evidence shows - everything can only go to hell: market libertarians, capitalism, Mickey Mouse imperialism, rule of morons, the terror of postmodernism, war for oil, atomic bomb."

Helen had no desire to be part of the Ark corporation, yet she still felt insulted.

"Besides," the gnome said, "you are disappearing."

Helen flinched and grabbed her rib instinctively, as if to hide holes in her body. Then she remembered he could not see anything through clothes.

How does he know? she wondered - until she inhaled another drag and watched the smoke wriggle out through invisible holes in her own flesh.

Ah. The smoke betrayed her.

"What does that matter?" Helen asked. "And what does disappearing even mean?"

"It means you are not in love with the human species. Or perhaps you are, but the human species is not in love with you. Not only not in love. At war. Disappearing means they are winning."

"So what can I do?" Helen asked, cynical.

"Nothing. Disappearing is only a visual representation of how you feel. Our inner cosmos is not an empty illusion. When necessary, it will absorb matter into itself."

"Like working capital?" Helen asked.

"Exactly the opposite of working capital."

"How?"

"Working capital is an embodied invention. Disappearing is the absorption of embodiment back into itself."

"Why would the inner cosmos want to absorb its physical representation?" Helen asked.

"That is the point. It does not want to. Every cosmos tends toward expansion and entropy. But when it is cramped, it begins to choke the energy required for expansion. It accumulates energy, accumulates... and then, because the inner cosmos is not like pressure in a bottle, it does not explode. It directs that energy toward self - elimination."

"It follows a simple logic: if its energy and ideas are useful to no one, self - elimination is rational. So the cosmos eats itself, in its spiritual truth and in its material representation, which is nothing but a crooked, perverted mirror of its true essence. Do you understand?"

"Yes, but why does my cosmos not want to exist?" Helen asked, almost sad.

"Because it has no money," the gnome said.

"Money?" Helen repeated. "That makes no sense."

"It makes perfect sense to the inner cosmos. It believes that if, as it is, it cannot provide its material representation with the basic means of life, then the existence of both it and its reflection is unnecessary."

"Believe me, it would prefer to tear itself away from embodiment - from your body - and let you work and live. But your body is its reflection in the mirror of distortion. It cannot exist without it. Do you understand?"

"So I can do nothing?"

"You can," the gnome said. "Earn money. Earn enough to survive, so your cosmos does not rebel and react in that grotesque self-destructive way."

"But that is impossible. Mammon is everywhere. You have to work for Mammon. I am not Dostoevsky."

"The whole world is in deep shit," the gnome said. "Dostoevsky today would not earn fifty cents. Maybe The Gambler, if he added a blow job in a casino bathroom."

"So what should I be?"

"It is not a matter of choice. You are what you are."

"Then should I surrender and disappear?" Helen asked.

"Try placing your material representation in front of the crooked mirror. Perhaps you will see your inner cosmos on the other side."

"How? With drugs?"

"You do not think at all!" Gnome snapped. "How will drugs help when they cost like the devil? You need to earn money, not spend it."

"I really don't understand," Helen muttered. "That my spirit depends on money so completely. What kind of time is this? Although this is not about time, it is about a spirit that self-destructs under environmental demands and cannot adapt and evolve."

"But it is adapting," the gnome said. "It is adapting to an environment that is self-destructing. Evolution and self-destruction are the same."

"Fine. Then how do I earn money?" Helen asked.

"You can't," the gnome said. "If you could, you wouldn't be disappearing."

"So the ones who survive will be those who endure this like steel, and not only endure but exploit it?"

"No," the gnome said. "The ones who survive are those who pass my test."

"You know," Helen whispered sadly, "it is not painful to not be chosen. It is painful when you know you were not chosen. No wonder the average person spends all his strength defending himself from knowledge."

"What a pity," the gnome smiled. "Knowledge is the only path to reliable, blessed ignorance."

Then, seeing her dark eyes, he softened.

"Look. I can tell you fairy tales about monastic life and babble about insight, but it is a straw for a drowning man. The truth is what it is. Some rise. Some disappear. Some

are lucky enough to invade Poland from far away. Some are unlucky enough to be born in Poland during the invasion. It is all luck, and the endurance of the inner cosmos. That's life."

"Of course," Helen laughed artificially. "The essence of life in Petitbourg, southeast Amia, can be summarized in two words: fuck it. What amen is to Christianity, allahu akbar to Islam, tavarish to Marxism, that is 'fuck it' in the age of capital. But I knew that before you appeared at my door."

"Hey, Weiss," the gnome said, "don't take it personally. I let my inner cosmos breathe. It's my third rolling paper since morning."

"Fine. But what do I do now?" Helen asked.

"What do I know? You humans always want to do something. Chill. Fall in love," Gnome said, and took another drag.

"Are you kidding? Falling in love is the most overrated thing in the world after pop art."

"Then scribble something. I can see you're talented. You don't have to invent hot water. Imitate. Your goal isn't to conquer the world. It's to save your cosmos with some cash. Besides, imitation is perfect ambivalence, a seesaw between mockery and admiration. It's like chocolate glaze on chocolate glaze. The whole world is built on imitation. They call it best practices."

The gnome pulled a card from his pocket. On it was a Slavic grandmother in a long skirt and headscarf, like a primer illustration.

"Here," he said. "Your theme is grandmother. Start with the king of scribblers, Fyodor Dostoevsky. Imitate Dostoevsky for me. Now."

Helen took the pen and wrote:

Imitation One - Fyodor Dostoevsky: "What he was, was unclear to everyone, even to himself. If anything was clear to him at times, it was not clear in the way it is clear to a Russian man of the nineteenth century, for to a nineteenth - century man nothing can be clear, because it is destined that everything be unclear, that is, that nothing be clear. And nothing he did could remove from his face the guilt he did not understand, though he knew that killing a grandmother and a feeble-minded witness could not be such a sin, because the grandmother would surely accumulate capital, and the feeble-minded witness would become prime minister of some Balkan state. But what am I babbling? Enough, dear Ikariy Semyonovich, enough of that!"

Imitation Two - Leo Tolstoy: "And then he killed him, stabbing the spear seven times into his gangrenous leg. He died slowly. After that he shot the woman. Dark blood splashed onto the silk underskirt, and pus and cancerous innards spilled across her round breasts. He knew perfectly that nothing could be corrected now, so he ripped his own belly with a rasp and jumped into the river of Saint Petersburg, to kill himself twice - once the body, and once the soul. What do you mean the theme is grandmother? What grandmother? Go to hell, I'm not Dostoevsky."

Imitation Three - Edgar Allan Poe: "That grandmother stared at me with eyes burning like coals from hell, summoning with her dark pupils the demons of the eastern underworld. Ah, what terrible eyes! Those eyes, those eyes that tore me from Lenore, nevermore, nevermore. Nevermore, and rains will pour, for Lenore, for Lenore."

Imitation Four - Viktor Pelevin: "The grandmothers walked the shitty Russian path one after another, so that the observer believed they were clones of one grandmother. Above their heads, in the heart of Washington, a blue-violet sign flickered in hologram bulbs. There was no doubt now it was one grandmother. Some grandmothers even emerged from the bellies of other grandmothers, in the traditional Russian way, and in the end it became clear to Oleg that there were no grandmothers at all."

Imitation Five - Slavoj Zizek: "In James Cameron's Titanic we see what happens when lower and upper class become equal. An iceberg appears, out of nowhere, and ruins everything. Therefore, you pioneers of acid philosophy must learn in time: your safe life in luxury cabins and fine restaurants will shatter like a ship on an iceberg the moment you desire a classless society. That evil social justice will take your Cuban cigars, Chinese toys, and Korean fireworks, and nobody will save you from social justice better than the American army. Starbucks Friday discounts, little toys with my face for free."

"Why Zizek again?" Helen asked. "You have twenty pages of cartoons analyzed in the spirit of damned Zizekism. Why more?"

"You're good at imitation," the gnome said. "Maybe I can put you in a narrow selection for the Ark."

"I bet you say that to all the girls," Helen grinned.

"I'm not that kind of gnome. But tell me - what would you say to your generation if you took off all masks? No imitation. You as you. What would you say?" the gnome asked.

Helen thought. She took another drag, noticing the paper had burned almost down to the cardboard. She put it out, coughed, and tried to pose as if speaking before a crowd of people born about ten years around her.

Then she abandoned the image and sat again.

She told the gnome she could not give a speech to them. She would not know what to say. She could not speak fifteen minutes with the same fire without that fire revealing doubt, bitterness, and the absence of direction.

Then she scratched her head, and suddenly jumped.

"I've got it," she said.

The gnome looked at her, curious.

"You were born dead," Helen said. "That's what I would tell them. You were born dead."

The gnome squeezed her hand, friendly and pitying. He left her two more white paper cylinders filled with magic and walked down the street, above which the pleasant night had already begun to darken.

10.

It was Sunday, and Helen drifted into a brief nap. She dreamed an entirely ordinary dream. She dreamed she was sitting in front of a computer, surfing the internet. It was stupid and dull, just as in waking life. But it was not quite this Helen. It was an old Helen - the one who read comedies that saddened entire generations of stillborn souls in these lands, believing something might change.

It was the Helen who still believed in something, who was still studying, who had not yet stepped into the world of neoliberal reforms and austerity measures.

That Helen hung online through an old dial-up connection.

First she took a quiz: "How sexy are you from zero to Elon Musk?" That was only to kill time.

Then she read comments under the Russian film Zhmurki, where classic 1990s gangsters brawl in the streets before becoming officials. One Englishman, a certain Z. Smith, commented that he had enjoyed "this almost science-fiction thriller." Vanyechka replied in fluent Russian: fuck you and your science fiction and your thriller, this is our reality.

Seven Amians began fighting below the comment section, arguing off-topic about who was responsible for the collapse of Yugoslavia, whether Tito had been simultaneously a CIA and KGB spy, and whether Engels advocated genocide against southern peoples.

Below that, someone posted an SMS number where one could pay a dollar and a half for betting tips.

An eighth Amian wrote, cutting his veins metaphorically through a movie quote: Milosevic is not guilty, we are the pieces of shit...

It was, overall, a very fine beginning of a quality nightmare.

Unexpectedly, the nightmare took an interesting turn.

Members of some minor red movement celebrated the centennial of the October Revolution by firing pistols into the sky. One stray bullet accidentally killed a senator.

The assassination had a domino effect. Power structures collapsed. Buildings burned. Then the internet connection was cut. Electricity vanished. Sirens screamed through the streets.

Helen woke up.

The first thought that came to her was how one properly directed bullet is all that is needed.

That was the first time the idea of eliminating Grin Koridin crossed her mind.

Strangely, she did not know why him. He was a ridiculous figure, one of a billion demons sucking strength from this world for their imaginary games. One of those easily replaced by new petty psychopaths selling the world for a handful of dollars.

Perhaps the reason was that Grin Koridin was not yet surrounded by cameras and bodyguards, so it would be easy for a bullet to reach him.

Or perhaps it was something personal. Hamlet - like revenge.

It could not be denied that Grin Koridin - for all the citizens of Petitbourg, and especially for Helen - had, however small he was in the hierarchy of power, thoroughly fucked their mothers in a Hamletian sense.

As if he had sensed her thoughts, that very day Grin Koridin instructed his servants to offer an employment to Helen starting the coming Monday.

She no longer had much time to think about revolution.

A person occupied with survival rarely thinks of revolutions.

And that is the greatest tragedy of our miserable Slavic existence: we do not think about revolutions when it is most necessary, and when we do think about them, it is only if someone else is meant to lead them.

Helen was no exception.

Very quickly she began thinking about what shirt to wear on her first day at work instead of what truly required thought in the era of the stillborn.

The greatest mistake of Helen's generation was that they tried to find meaning in life instead of giving meaning to their death.

Hannibal stood at the gates of Amia and said, "Good evening, Clarice."

But Helen did not care much at that moment.

She had a job in a city where getting a job was a lottery. Now she could, like half the nation, be happy waking every morning to work for peanuts and popcorn, for gods and their profit, for the noble goal of marching toward nothingness inscribed on the palm of the black East as destiny.

Interestingly, Helen's life question depended entirely on one phone call from Grin Koridin.

He did not even need to speak. It was enough to lift the receiver and nod.

His interlocutor could not see the nod, but surely knew it from the way Mr. Koridin breathed.

One unspoken word from the king of Petitbourg was enough for an ordinary person to receive employment in a state where employment was a luxury.

The company Helen joined on Monday was called the Agency for Electrodistribution.

No one knew what it actually did.

It was some kind of advisory - or more precisely consulting - firm that explained to electricity the most efficient direction in which to travel toward the boilers and washing machines of the average household.

Its true activity, however, was applied nepotistic eclecticism and intellectual terrorism.

Helen was placed in a small office with six other women. The office was pleasant, with a large window on the sunny side of the street. The problem was that all six women knew how to speak.

And since municipal firms - especially those with the word agency in their name - have no real work and exist merely as an illusion of economic survival, the women were very bored.

Helen was in hell.

This is the moment when, stepping into an office and finding yourself crammed with six people into a few square meters, you realize you have fucked up badly.

"Every morning I eat 35 grams of rye bread thinly spread with hummus and low - fat yogurt. For lunch two spoons of peas, 28 grams of boiled chicken... buckwheat bars for a snack..." said Colleague A.

"What is couscous?" Helen asked. "That... marmot thing?"

Everyone looked at her as if she were retarded.

"Hummus, not couscous" Colleague A corrected.

"Heh... joking..." Helen mumbled.

Silence.

"Egg contains 30 calories, banana 89... celery 63... 101..." said Colleague B.

"I never regret spending money on quality mascara or lip liner. I always buy Keybilin pencil number 88, nude. It's like apricot, but not really apricot - more orange - pink, pale, with a shiny tip and colored cap. Never the ones with black caps, they crumble and dry your lips. The most important thing is that it doesn't dry the skin..." said Colleague C.

The voices began blending.

Something thundered inside Helen's head.

A giant couscous loomed above her with bulging cursed eyes.

"Eighty calories... one hundred twenty... Versace gold... Valentino life and beauty... super wellness London style... sixty-six calories... new double effect mascara..."

Couscous marched and blew trumpets.

Helen felt dizzy.

"Maybelline New York has focused on a new generation of women, free to express themselves differently each day. A generation that craves novelty, follows trends, consumes them easily, and fully adapts them to herself..."

The couscous turned pink, then plaid, then striped. Egyptian pyramids danced to their trumpets. The sun rose and became the Eye of Horus. Couscous turned into marmots and danced in circles, in circles, in circles.

The same day repeated endlessly.

"Perfect curls are made by wrapping a two-and-a-half-finger strand around the iron, directing it inward... fourteen grams of couscous... spread on rye bread cut into four-millimeter slices..."

Every day from 7 to 16.

Every day discussions of calories, childbirth, body creams, lipsticks, dress patterns, hairstyles. Scarves and skirts inspired by Carrie Bradshaw. A delusion of New York walking in their heads.

Mass psychosis.

Mass delusion about beauty, intelligence, importance of people who are no longer important even to themselves.

Idealia nervosa.

Brigitte Bonanca was right.

Helen was no longer sure whether it was June or October. Not sure whether it was Wednesday or Monday.

The colleagues discussed positive thinking. Quoted Louise Hay. Then discussed a shooting in one of the former Yugoslav republics.

"That could have been us," they said.

"Terrorism is the evil of the twenty-first century," they said.

Moments later they returned to hair color. Light mahogany natural or light mahogany classic?

Natural or classic? Nike or Reebok? Iced coffee or latte? Coca - Cola or Pepsi?

All ancient riddles, all mysteries of the Sphinx, all seekers of the Holy Grail kneel before the new age and collapse into one grand question repeated by a smiling worker in a yellow - red uniform:

"For here or to go?"

Evolution is the process by which a perfectly useful ape becomes a completely useless human.

Billions of years, billions of cells in perfect organization, the first wheel, the first microscope, rabies vaccine, alternating current, and the crucified son of God - all for one question:

"Would you like fries with that?"

For centuries people dedicated their lives and deaths to a single result: that six women could sit in an office and lose hours and days discussing calories, hairstyles, and the shape of their asses.

Six cockroaches would be more useful to the world than six women in one small office in Petitbourg.

We are born dead.

Useless.

Redundant.

Plague of the planet.

Cancer of the universe.

Consumers without identity and mechanical workers.

Machines in the production of hopelessness and chemical waste.

Metastases on the brain of the perfectly useful ape.

God's creation that lost control and now spends its days trying to bite its own elbow.

The next thing you lose is self-love.

"I am the same as all of them," Helen thought. "No better, no worse. An ordinary birth and an even more ordinary death, and the time between so slow it barely exists. Birth and death become the same point in time because everything between them is wasted on self-tanning creams, protein diets, and Rihanna's latest video. And there is nothing you can do to change it."

She counted days to the weekend, to next month, to New Year, to autumn, to the first snow, to the first sun, to the last sun, to hell.

She counted days waiting for something to end.

The only thing ending was life.

Helen lit a cigarette and noticed a small cloud of smoke stretching around her neck. Another hole in her body, somewhere between her left shoulder and chin.

As she inhaled, she felt sharp pain in her lower abdomen and whimpered through clenched teeth.

"What times we live in, one should be happy just to have a job," Colleague C said.

That was when Helen snapped.

She stood, threw the cigarette through the window, and blocked the office doorway, shadowing the neon light.

"No time has come," she said through her teeth. "No time has come, C. You made it."

She jumped forward and grabbed Colleague C by the hair, pulling, intending to drag her to the window and throw her out.

The others stopped her.

Somewhere in a tiny corner of her subconscious Helen knew they were on the ground floor.

That became a mitigating circumstance when, somehow, she found herself at the police station.

She complained of severe abdominal pain and was released with written instructions to report to psychiatric services.

"Where exactly does it hurt?" the doctor asked.

"Everything hurts. Liver, spleen, gallbladder, stomach." Her hand moved vaguely across her abdomen. Her whole body hurt. Existence hurt.

The doctor lifted X-rays, rotated them, concluded nothing was wrong, and referred her to psychiatry.

That made everything hurt even more.

At the Institute "Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether," Dr. Mary Trim was not thrilled to see her.

Helen smiled cynically at the thought that the feeling was mutual.

On the referral it read: "Diagnosis requested based on case study; pharmacotherapy; prognosis; clinical picture."

Dr. Mary lifted a card with a grotesque black Rorschach blot.



"What do you see here?" she asked with grave seriousness.

"Leon Trotsky," Helen said.

"Leon Trotsky specifically?"

"Specifically."

"And where exactly is your Trotsky?"

"In this small white hole inside the large black ink bat."

"So you see a bat?"

"Yes... though not exactly. A partial bat with dark glasses. That is Viktor Pelevin sleeping upside down like a bat. He sleeps like that."

"Viktor who?"

"Viktor is the messiah of modern literature. Literature for the poor explaining to them what cocaine, elite prostitutes, or sushi look like. In his case all creativity boils down to jokes about the poor that the poor themselves laugh at. That is why rulers love him. Though they prefer Lolita or something Wildean. Still, entertaining the poor with the poor is sufficient."

Dr. Mary raised another blot.



"What do you see here?"

"A social democrat shaking hands with an ultranationalist. They are agreeing how to outsmart their own people. One proposes subtle genocide, the other race theory. That is politics."

Another blot.



"International Monetary Fund," Helen said.

"Aha, the IMF... all right." muttered Dr. Mery.

The next image was the most ordinary, faceless blot.



"This is the world transitioning from corporate feudalism to a new society. Here is both the end of the world and utopia."



"And here? What do you see?"

"Nothing," Helen said.

"Not even Libera?"

"Especially not Libera."

Finally the doctor asked, "Weiss, what is your profession?"

"Psychologist."

"So you're messing with me?"

"No. I know what projective techniques are. But I answered honestly. Everything hurts. My stomach, uterus, liver. They are eating me."

Her eyes darkened like tar.

"As long as there is power, there will be no freedom," she said. "Freedom exists outside institutions. But the nation loves institutions. Loves bureaucracy fat, poisoned water, legal drugs of dystopia, and above all a leader. As long as that nation exists, people like me must live their nonsense they call meaning."

Dr. Mary prescribed Prozac and Valium.

One tablet in the morning. Half in the evening. After meals with yogurt or water.

Appointment in 30 days.

If after 30 days you still do not see happiness and beauty in the state arrangement of Vladimir Gord, increase from 15mg to 30mg.

Helen did not initially trust Prozac.

She tried yoga - froze in seal pose.

She tried socializing - ended drunk with Adam or paranoid on acid.

She tried normal people - they discussed calories again.

She tried romantic comedy with Adam Sandler and ended in nihilism because so many people enjoy Adam Sandler films.

"A boyfriend?" she briefly considered, then laughed. You must be kidding.

Then she remembered: the vibrator. She had bought it some time ago when she realized that lovers cost her twice as much and gave her half as much pleasure. She rummaged through the drawer to find it, but first she found the black notebook of doom. The black notebook and Helena stared at each other, eye to eye, threatening and hostile. Still, Helena did not dare to pick it up. She left it on the shelf and took the vibrator instead. The vibrator was made of bright green, transparent plastic like those cheap Chinese souvenirs with shells and decorative pebbles floating inside. Extreme kitsch for an extreme lady. It was truly ugly, but a few cents cheaper than the realistic ones. Helena turned the toy on, but her mind was empty. Blackness, abyss, chasm. The nothingness was so terrifying that Helena thought it would have been better if the dollars thrown at the toy had been spent on a firm, thick rope for hanging. Still, she decided to make an effort. She enlisted internet pornography to help her. Entering the world of cartoon eels, animated beasts, and silicone toys, she seemed to fully understand why love between a man and a woman had finally become extinct. It was not because they had realized the truth. It was because they had an alternative. Fantasy was two clicks away, and there was simply no need to love in order to dream. All dreams are on the internet anyway. Fortunately, the internet cannot reproduce, nor can people self - fertilize, so the porn industry remains the most useful human invention since the can opener, and the Japanese, favorites of the industry since 1939, carry out their fascist eugenics by digging their claws into the deepest depths of dirty human imagination, keeping man nailed to the screen until he rots in his solitude.

Blackness, abyss, chasm? Never with Prozac. In the end, Helena surrendered to the charms of Prozac, letting all the couscouses and their cursed eyes finally disappear from her irritated neurons.

One pill of joy with the first morning coffee and everything is perfectly fine...

11.

It was a hot July day when Helen suffered a terrible nightmare that shook her world. Typical for a nightmare, she dreamed she was sitting in an office.

In the first act of the nightmare, Helen sits in the office. She sits directly opposite the window. It is exactly 6:58. Wind batters the panes. It is still dark, and the dawn is icy. December cold roars through the room. Restlessness grips her, and her throat hurts. Something tightens around her neck.

The silence is broken only by the sound of metal and some strange whining - it was a wolf or a child. Helen hands papers to Shuchurevka, and Shuchurevka flings them everywhere, screaming. She grabs her planner to throw it at her, then changes her mind at the last moment.

Helen wants Shuchurevka to smash her head. She wants to go deaf, and yet she is afraid. She does not know what she is afraid of.

Shuchurevka cannot do anything to her.

She does not own her.

So who owns her?

Who owns everything?

Suddenly, the office begins to sink. A great grave swallows them, like a dark hell. It smells of urine, lighter gas, and heated spoons. Along the walls of the pit, graffiti appears - then comes alive in scenes of sex in courtrooms and amphitheatres.

Then they are falling, all of them falling, and Shuchurevka claws at the edge of the earth trying to pull herself out. Someone grabs her by her black, chalky hair, ugly as a broom, and slams her against the rim of the grave.

But she does not die.

She cannot die.

The first sign of hell is immortality.

Helen woke drenched in sweat.

It was 6:59, and Shuchurevka was not dead.

No narcissistic psychopath can ever die. They reproduce by tormenting others. To survive a psychopath means to overpower them. To survive Shuchurevka means to become Shuchurevka yourself.

Helen was so shaken she felt she was going insane. That might have been true, because, to be honest, there is no psychologist who is not insane.

Or perhaps it was the mescaline, acid, and weed she shared daily with Adam, the first man of the world, as she shared her black heart.

That day, Adam brought new people into their intimate world, into their platonic circle of love, into their only and their safe.

Helen did not like it.

New kids from the block. Backstreet Boys. Disgusting, she thought. Pretty little boys who were nothing but a sad nostalgia for the youth of a ridiculous man.

But it was betrayal.

Betrayal of their friendship and their love.

And not only that. The new kids ruthlessly stole not only their friendship but also their psychedelic drugs, which, unlike friendship, were not cheap.

Disappointed by Adam's small betrayal, and still under the impression of her dream about Shuchurevka, Helen seemed to break.

Even with Prozac, she felt something in her mind grow truly dark, and that horrible feeling of a wasted life return, charging her tenfold for every attempt to escape it.

Rain began to fall, and under that black impression Helen walked toward the church to ask the great Lord God for a favor.

More precisely, one of two favors: save her or kill her. Or both, if he was merciful.

The street where the church stands is remote and unpaved. The path is scattered with small red gravel and silver sand that shines even when wet with rain. Modest white houses line both sides, and at the end rises the temple on Brestova Street.

Brestova Street is the calmest street in the world. Spiritually it is a small oasis in the desert of Petitbourg.

And, as always somewhere between the seventh and the twenty - seventh chapter of any book, the main hero meets the main heroine. Or the other way around.

A whole chain of circumstances - plot, atmosphere in every particle of air, the fresh smell of wind, even the weather suddenly clearing - everything adjusts itself to that fatal meeting.

In short, the entire scenery reshapes itself for the birth of a fairy tale.

Helen was dressed like a saint, a black scarf over her hair, a reborn virgin standing proudly before the church doors.

And he - the only young face on a street where only old men walked.

He was playing chess, long fingers lifting the black queen toward pale lips.

Helen approached the window glass and watched his tall silhouette. The thin figure of a blond young man rose and looked up. They exchanged a smile.

It seemed he liked her even though she was wrapped in a black dress and scarf like a burqa, even though she was fat from too many antidepressants and cheap synthetic drugs, even though she was pale, average-looking, and seemed well-read.

In that first fatal minute it looked as if he forgave her for not being beautiful enough, and might forgive her if she turned out to be too intelligent.

That was enough to give Helen a kind of hope, although she did not know what she hoped for, or why.

His fingers played with the pieces, sliding over the queen.

D4. C5. C4. Queen's Gambit. The sacrifice of the black pawn.

His fingers kept playing with the queen. First the index finger, then the middle finger, moving back and forth, lightly gliding along the wooden piece as if it were melting.

"This is the most erotic moment of my life," she thought. "This is all my god can offer me in this country, in this city, in a world on the threshold of another war, in a world obsessed with cheap sex and expensive cocaine where reality-show contestants are only waiting for a reason to slaughter each other."

As soon as she thought it, something tender and pathetic spread through her soul, and she believed that everything happening in Café No. 66 on Brestova Street must be happening for some great cosmic reason.

His name was Vlad. She repeated it letter by letter and watched his fingers slowly resign the match and lift a glass of Irish whiskey. Sweet yellow whiskey and a thin filter of a white cigarette alternated at his lips.

Her knees trembled.

She was dying.

Atlantis sank, Pompeii spat fire, the Roman Empire fell to its knees.

Gods, have mercy.

Vlad Fishar was not mysterious like the standard fairy - tale princes. Vlad was colorful, cheerful, high - spirited. He had a strong accent and stressed the "A." He was from the north, but a hot southern spirit shook him.

Vlad Fishar was an international chess vice - champion and a passionate lover of jazz.

Thin as if he barely weighed sixty kilos, he constantly drew his long bony fingers along the glass, touching it the way he had touched the black queen, smiling, unaware of the erotic charge of every movement.

Also, a great advantage of Vlad Fishar was the golden British passport peeking from his pocket.

A ticket to paradise, Helen thought.

Vlad Fishar could help her escape Amia.

A golden EU passport could be obtained only through marriage to a citizen or through pulling strings, but Helen looked at his passport as if it were within reach.

Maybe, after some time, she could even ask him for a fictitious marriage for the passport, and he, looking into her dark eyes where Amians dragons breathed fire, would take pity and buy her a ticket to the European paradise.

In truth, the passport was only an excuse to play with him. She simply wanted to play. She had to justify it to herself. She would spend a lot of money on liquid foundation that hid the traces of vanishing. And after all, if everything turned out to be maximally stupid and sadistic, she could always tell herself it had all been for the golden passport.

"If I could go back to the seventies right now and convince some fighter for democracy not to fight, I would show him you," Vlad said as if they had always known each other. "He would immediately understand what that slogan means - 'slaves of freedom.' In democracy you can always state your opinion in a referendum, buy a Big Mac or Levis, but what's the point? You still play cricket against the Queen of Hearts."

"Cricket?" she frowned.

"Cricket, yes. From that story, 'Alice in the asylum.' You know - the frustrated civil servant always running late so the director doesn't cut his head off... you know?"

"That would be Alice in Wonderland. And the civil servant would be the rabbit?"

"Yes, yes, exactly. It's pointless to play cricket. The queen always wins. In the end she's the one who invents and changes the rules. Everyone has to refuse to play cricket. But the time for that hasn't come yet..."

"So what time is it now? Time for silence?" Helen asked, cynically.

"Yes, for silence. Partly." He paused and cut her with his gaze. She was still intoxicated by his hands.

"Is that why you're apolitical?"

"Oh no, no, no. I'm very political. I just don't play cricket."

Smart boy, she thought.

It poured gasoline on her fires.

She couldn't speak.

She could only burn.

"Do you always sacrifice the black pawn for the black king?" she asked, just to break the silence. She must have sounded stupid. Why did she ask such idiocy? She had never looked at chess so banally.

Collectively, chess is political: a functional, mobile piece dies for a stiff, useless greatness. Individually, chess is madness: a functional, mobile piece dies for a stiff, useless greatness.

Instead of speaking about something she knew - to impress him with knowledge - all she could do was ask about something that didn't interest her at all.

"Sometimes for the queen," he said.

What a cliché.

Everyone knows the queen in chess is not a woman but the counselor or, translated into modern language: a defense lawyer. Helen wondered whether Vlad knew he was speaking nonsense. But Vlad Fishar did not look embarrassed at all. He looked at her calmly, as if with his long slim fingers he were driving a knife straight into her stomach.

Suddenly he leaned in and pressed a quiet, naive kiss to her lower lip.

That kiss threw her down the grave - she did not know whether she was falling or flying.

"Am I falling or flying?" she whispered.

"It's simple," Vlad said. "The difference between falling and flying is the bottom. Where there is no bottom to crash into, every fall becomes flight."

"So this is my prince," Helen thought. "A turquoise shirt that smells of marijuana, a nervous tic that makes both legs shake, a glass that is never empty, and hair like a young Trotsky. Fine. Like princess, like prince. Though he should be trimmed into a young Josiph Vissarionovich."

For a moment Helen thought it would be better to be in the company of a buffo frog than a prince who, like herself, did not know whether it was morning or evening, Monday or Wednesday, July or October.

But it was already too late. She was already hooked on his dry lips and on his blue eye that drifted slightly left. Then she did something that was not Helenish at all, and had never been Helenish. Hiding her gaze like a schoolchild, she extended her hand and nested it beneath his fingers.

"There it is," she thought when she realized what she had done. "There goes dignity. There goes pride. Everything went to hell - for a Brit who is probably as crazy as the March Hare and Lewis Carroll combined."

But there was no going back.

The damage was done.

The next thing you lose is everything.

12.

"This is a menage - a - trois" Vlad said to Helen, showing her a chess set for three in his room. "But I prefer one on one. Black and white classic. Eight by eight."

"The best people have always valued folie a deux" Helen said with a nervous, artificial smile. It was one of those moments when you feel so stupid that you simply relax into your stupidity, accepting it as natural and unchangeable.

Vlad Fishar's room was full of life. Old paintings dragged from some landfill hung on the walls, colorful like Wonderland, strange sculptures, books, and voodoo masks everywhere. Everything carried the spirit of Peter Pan's homeland and African magic. The smell of incense and weed was suffocating, yet Helen felt comfortable. She had forgotten her black notebook, the Romanian gasoline, the German chancellor, and her life mission. Forgetting the most important things, she felt the weight of the world fall from her back.

All because Vlad had magical fingers.

Although she instinctively felt that it was impossible to disappoint or offend him, Helen was extremely nervous. He noticed and caught her between his neck and shoulder. She panicked that her liquid foundation would smear and reveal her secret. His movement was strange and unusual, and even when she realized her secret was safe, she remained frightened.

What on earth was he doing?

He moved his hand as if searching for some magical point on her body, and when he finally found it, he pressed his palm firmly against her neck.

"Ow!" Helen gasped, staring at him as if he had lost his mind.

And then she felt the meaning of the strange touch of the great Vlad Fishar. Her body began to relax, and her mind emptied. It felt like floating on mist. Liberation from thought, fear, insecurity. A sleeping superego. Total detachment.

"How did you..." she tried to ask, but he closed her lips with his fingers.

"Magic," he said.

Vlad could do what no one else could. Her skin froze and burned at the same time.

But this zen, like every good zen, was only a prelude to anti-zen. After nirvana, lying beside Vlad Fishar like beside a stranger, all unpleasant thoughts suddenly returned and collapsed onto her. She remembered her idiotic position as a clerk in the parliament of shame, the circus of freaks, the German chancellor, Grin Koridin, and the same old world where everyone lets others piss on them their entire life just to earn five minutes of pissing on someone else.

The result: thousands and thousands of liters of flammable ammonia.

This city will burn, she thought. This state will scream in the flash of a new war.

Vlad will return to his Northern Ireland, she thought. In two weeks he will remember nothing. And when someone asks him where Helen is, he will ask which Helen.

And for her, this is one of the last nights on Earth.

Vlad Fishar dressed shyly and pulled the blanket over his head. He needed time before emerging. Slowly he relaxed, lit a cigarette, and began telling a story, colorful like him.

"I wanted to burn them. The whole assembly. Like you. To take a Kalashnikov and kill them all. To blow this cursed city into the air. Then I left. I saw other cities, felt other souls and lives, felt other blood. I lived other people's lives. I searched for a country better than this and different people. I found nothing. Hostels full of blue-collar workers, professors begging, resurrected Slavic communists reconciled with God, libertarians in top hats, students travelling the world to become spiritually richer, and armies of ordinary people fighting for fame and significance. Babushka inside babushka inside babushka. That is this world. Your great Europe. An egg inside an egg that never hatches. Everything that could heal the spirit is gone. Noise, garbage, racism, snobbish suburbs. An ugly world."

"And then you returned?"

"No. Then I went to Africa for relics. I became an illusionist. A magician."

He sat in the middle of the room inside a large circle drawn with white flour.

"Look. This is a mandala. A symbol of wholeness, Jung's self, God and nirvana. It's no coincidence that parliament seats form a semicircle. A semicircle is incomplete

wholeness, schizophrenic division, hell. A circle whose ends never meet means only one thing - fragmentation, torn ego, crucified God. That is the reign of the devil and his right hand - Mammon. The opposite is the perfect circle. Voodoo ritual always takes place inside a circle."

"And how do you pay your bills, Vlad?" Helen laughed.

"I told you - magic. Move in with me. Marry me."

"You've known me for two days. Why say that?"

"I don't know. People say things."

The failed, lucid proposal made Vlad pull the blanket over his head again, though he soon forgot what he had said. Yet somehow this lucid creature had pulled the best out of a woman who never trembled and never dreamed - a woman without career fantasies, without vacation money, without pink lip gloss, without even a good pair of jeans.

Instead of lipstick and perfume, Helen carried Xanax and Prozac in her pockets.

She was a woman who knew she would shine sooner in the flash of an atomic bomb than walk the streets of Paris.

A young woman who does not tremble - that was the product of the end of an era that believed in free markets, democracy, and world peace.

First or last, unique or irrelevant - it didn't matter.

The world was having a stroke.

Libera and Justitia were long dead.

And the farce of her small life - two or three foaming outbursts of rage, brief blindness of passion - were only short nights among the last nights on Earth announcing the end of another nation of orange blood and its ridiculous rebellious history spinning in circles.

There were no words to drag Vlad Fishar into daylight, so Helen shrugged and slid under the blanket beside him.

Of course it was clear - all her great loves were schizophrenic.

But this time she was not afraid.

The last thing you lose is fear.

Helen had finally gone completely mad for the great Vlad Fishar.

A month passed. Two. Six. Everything dissolved into fog and identical dawns.

Vlad told her he had never been so in love. Once he felt something similar - with a Japanese girl named Sun. In Japan everyone is called Sun, he said, and it does not

mean Sun in their language. She worked as an animator in the adult cartoon industry. She drew tentacles.

"Imagine how different Monday would be if you had to draw porn every morning," he said. "Imagine the Monday of the bald, chubby Japanese man who writes the script for them. Japanese porn is revenge for Hiroshima. Nagasaki revenge hasn't started yet, but when it does it will be as tragicomic as tentacles."

That was Vlad Fishar's declaration of love.

He played some sugary song and lied to her that its refrain would last forever.

LSD lasts twelve hours, Helen thought. Bufotenin lasts thirty minutes. Love lasts until the first working Monday at 6:00, when you would sell everything just to stay in bed five more minutes. By five minutes I mean five hours. By five hours I mean eternity. Can he read my thoughts? Does he know how tired I am?

"Why don't you have friends?" Vlad asked suddenly. "Did they all leave you?"

"No one left me. They were perfectly fine companions. I just don't stay long in their lives."

"Where are they now?"

"They're here. They're still friends. I'm the enemy."

He often asked her why she stayed silent.

"Maybe I don't want anyone to know me," she told him. "I like being unknown. I like jobs where I work among people too self-absorbed to notice me, people who remain strangers. Hundreds come and go without bothering me. I never cared whether I would be a surgeon or a ketchup promoter. I just wanted to be a stranger among strangers."

"And no one touches your circles," Vlad smiled.

"Vlad, Vlad, Vlad... you don't know... you don't know what it's like here..." Helena repeated passionately, continuing her monologue. "The time spent with the people who passed through my life was empty and painful. The peak of my life - of course I mean the spiritual peak - was when on page numbered 3 I read the sentence: 'Once in Russia there was a generation that rejoiced in summer, the sea and the sun and chose - Pepsi.' The book was called Generation P.

First an image formed in my mind of a Spanish meadow. Don Quixote rides on his white nag, behind him I ride on a donkey, and in the middle of the road he stops and says: 'In Russia there lived a generation that rejoiced in summer, the sea and the sun and chose Pepsi.'

The second image in my mind is Russia in 1989. Woland finishes reading Bulgakov and understands it as an invitation. He descends into Moscow, sits in a tavern and, to the general astonishment of everyone drinking tea with vodka, only without the tea, orders a Pepsi.

The third image looked like this: a girl whose shelves are empty and on which there stands only a stupid feeling of guilt and failure fills the emptiness with those few papers that speak about Pepsi.

Or maybe all those images were not caused by that sentence. Maybe it was the sentence: 'Creators are of no fucking use to us here.'

How pathetic is that, Vlad? Tell me the truth! How pathetic is it to sit cocooned in a stale corner of the failed country of Amia, with a bottle of oversweetened Pepsi and a library membership card?"

"My dear..." he said tenderly. "That's all right."

"Yes, that would be all right in some other situation, in some other time. For example, in the century in which Marx finishes his Capital and says, 'When our turn comes, we will not apologize for justice.' Or in the time of Dostoevsky, when some Nastasya Sergeyevna falls flat on her knees in a cold and deserted church and calls to God, calls to the devil, calls to who knows whom and cries, taking that whole circus completely seriously. Today no one takes anything seriously anymore. Knights simultaneously despise and drink Pepsi, they pity the poor and piss on the poor, and in time they become what they hate because today there is nothing else they could become.

Look, those few papers that fill my empty shelves - that is, that moment in which Don Quixote says something to a little fat man on a donkey - that cost 5 euros. The paradox of finding meaning separated from their world of pressures and mammonic politicization lies in the fact that you pay for that meaning with money. The one who does not have those five euros, naturally, cannot enter the tower of knowledge and cannot mount a mule or a donkey and become Sancho or a future knight. Everything by which the liberal system differs from all previous ones and which gives it an inexpressible advantage is that every human idea is based on the symbol of initial capital, or an euro banknote. Therefore, if you find yourself in a state where those five euros cannot be spent on a book of light, but on necessary bread, you are excluded from knowledge. And worst of all, Don Quixote himself consciously participates in all of this!

And why is that so? The simple reason is that for the first time in history we have a Don Quixote who has defeated the windmills. If we take into account that every previous representation of windmills was nothing other than power, it can be said that it was repressive power that did not allow the knight to defeat it, and he fought constantly until he gathered behind him such a number of followers that there was no one left to rule over. In a situation of liberal power there exists a situation in which the windmills simply surrender and say, 'All right, knight, you have won.' They move away from the horizon and give way to doors. The rulers, therefore, open the doors to the noble knight and let him among them, telling him that both glory and attention and a place at the top of the world are his. And of course, a million dollars. But only after he signs the contract. In this way, the knight separates himself from the people, no longer shares their fate, and behind him no longer go followers, but consumers who swallow every ejaculate of his omnipotent mind lost in the idea of passive resistance, which long ago ceased to be resistance. Liberal power strikes at the ego here, because there is no point in fighting those who have accepted you and given you a throne. Along with the illusion of occult fireworks that give everything a mystical tone, you are filled with the orgasmic feeling that there is some god who has chosen you. Add to all of that the terrible, terrible, terrible and bulky loneliness of a man lost at the top of the world and you get a schizo-man who set out to attack the windmills, but in the opposite direction, moving away from them."

"You talk as if there's some grand plan at the top.", Vlad laughed, "The truth is the world is ruled by morons. We use the occult as an excuse to give meaning to their stupidity. They're psychopaths, yes, but not geniuses. And we prefer calling them Illuminati instead of what they are - morons without a conscience. We fought autocracy so now we're ruled by a smiling SS army and a Mickey Mouse state that grows rich filming remakes of the same movie."

"Yes, I know, I know, I know! But why does their rule reflect only on Amia and small and stupid countries like it? You know, when an American sells his soul, he does it for at least a million. A Russian negotiates. And in Amia, a soul is sold for a miserable job in a public company, because the soul of an Amian, and the human soul

in general, here isn't worth a piss-poor bean. Ever since petty criminals entered the new millennium in the roles of bankruptcy trustees and presidents of management boards, every little crook can shake his stupid dick over the soul of any man under any conditions. And the guilt that doesn't even exist doesn't have to be proven, not even according to Kafka's scenario. Simply, the stupid dick is hungover, chopping off the heads that cross his path while nothing still functions and nobody cares. Live, die, resurrect, turn into a vampire, it's all the same to everyone. About fifteen years ago someone wound up the system like one of those Donald Duck toys that play music and dance, and now it plays and dances some old Backstreet Boys song translated into plain Chinese. That someone died long ago, and Donald now has a little axe in his hands with which he uncontrollably swings in the rhythm of the song 'I don't care who you are, where you're from, what you do...', so if you happen to find on his path, you are dead, and if not - never mind - you'll be there next time."

"My dear, you're getting too upset over morons. Find some opium that will help you survive and I promise you we will escape. We will escape to a better place where instead of smoking bad weed to escape reality, they snort expensive cocaine to escape reality. Actually, no, no, no! We'll escape to an even better place!"

"Where, to the Moon?" she asked, her eyes flashing.

"To the Moon if necessary!"

"And how will you locate the Moon?"

"Easy. I'll find the American flag. Wherever it's planted, that's the Moon."

She laughed.

"Give me whiskey!" she shouted. "Give me whiskey and let's destroy the establishment!"

He poured whiskey into their glasses. They clinked and drank in one gulp. Helen shuddered and frowned.

"I know girls love diamonds, but 'Ruby' whiskey is far better," he said apologetically.

"Too much lyricism, not enough whiskey. Pour!"

He kept refilling until the room spun.

Around 3:30 a.m., the spinning exacted its price. Helen vomited, swearing to God and the German chancellor she would never drink again. Vlad laughed loudly at her religious monologue.

"It's not nice to laugh at someone's misfortune," she muttered, clutching her head.

"Go! Leave! I want to be alone!"

"Are you kicking me out of my own house?"

"Take a walk. Walking is healthy."

He grew serious.

"Do you want all of us to leave, or just some of us?"

Another Vlad appeared across the room. Then one in the television. A fourth swung from the chandelier.

"Very funny. Everyone knows hologram mirrors can do this. Don't you have better tricks?"

Then he vanished. An owl with his face appeared above the bookshelf.

"And this?"

She waved her hand dismissively.

"Or perhaps Vienna-Romanian style?", he asked and turned into a bat.

A black bat fluttered through the room. It too had Vlad's face.

"Excellent. Now fly away."

Though he used no mirrors, only pure magic, Vlad saw she was not impressed. Something troubled her.

He returned to human form and walked toward the door.

"You see, Vlad..." she said suddenly, "...in those beautiful countries where people live as columnists and designers, time is a straight line extending into endless paradise. In the East, time is a segment with visible beginning and end. In Amia, $t = .$, time is a point."

She sighed.

"I'm disappearing."

He sat beside her.

"What do you mean?"

She unbuttoned her shirt, removed the artificial silk scarf, wiped off her makeup. Her body was full of small holes along her neck, some merging into larger ones.

"I'm disappearing, damn it! I feel less and less. My spirit is vanishing piece by piece. Physically I'm becoming immaterial. I've tried everything. Even hallucinogens. I can't even find a good dealer."

She burst into tears.

"And worst of all, I'll disappear remembered as a PPS member. A mute MP of the Progressive Forces Party. Mammon's servant. I'm Grin Koridin's toilet paper. His shoe brush. His dust rag. His trash can. His enema. Vladimir Gord's penis pump! That's what I am!"

"You're not... not a pump... I mean, you're not a pump," he stammered awkwardly.

She raged about God, Che Guevara, honor sold for a Big Mac and small cola to go.

"Don't cry, my dear...After war, a defense aviator will write your name in the clouds," Vlad tried to soothe her.

"I don't need clouds. They'll be full of lead. I just need a chance to say I'm sorry."

The little holes of air on her neck, like a rash of invisibility, were spreading and merging into one single antimatter. Although he could not know what that disappearance actually signified, Vlad stayed with Helena. At times he would joke, noticing that her waist was becoming ever narrower, but about the serious consequences of her vanishing neither of them thought to speak first. She would only gloomily lower her head when the subject was unpleasant to her, and he would notice it. Then they would both simply fall silent.

She thought that after disappearing she would become one of the undead. She would be trapped at the foot of a mountain, in some kind of hell of eternal life, constantly hungry with various desires, yet cursed with the inability to define those desires or give them form. Vlad tried to investigate what disappearance actually was, but without success. Even holy Google himself knew nothing about it. It was only known that the professional name for the phenomenon was "dystopian dermatitis." How it arises and why, no one had a clue. Unofficially it was believed to be a punishment for sins. All in all, as much was known about dystopian dermatitis as about most other diseases.

Months passed.

Months passed and life flowed in its usual rhythm. Apart from the spreading of dystopian dermatitis, nothing particularly significant was happening in Helena's life. And then, on Monday, November 7 of the current year, at a meeting scheduled for 19:00, Vlad Fischer did not appear. He did not appear at 19:25, nor at 19:38. He was not in his apartment, he was not at "Mauritius," he was nowhere.

Without word or note, without goodbye, Vlad disappeared before Helen.

Cold wind blew through Petitbourg. It was as if the owl-man had never existed.

Except for his abandoned room full of trinkets imitating art, there was no witness that any of it had happened.

But Helen knew the truth was simpler.

Sometimes people just leave.

Even if they are chess vice-champions who walk on water and turn into birds.

Vlad Fishar simply left.

13.

Thirty days had already passed since Vlad Fishar left Petitbourg, and Helen was still dreaming the same dream.

The first part of the dream was borrowed reality. In that first part Helen simply remembered how Vlad had taken her to the beach and, to cheer her up, walked on water.

"You're definitely jumping on stones hidden beneath the surface," Helen would say to him. "You're a liar."

"Then check," Vlad would answer. "Just check whether there are stones under the water."

"No," she would whine. "If there are stones, I won't know what to do. And if there aren't stones, then I really won't know what to do."

The first part of the dream would end the moment Helen looked toward the sky. Sky, water and earth would merge into a miraculous light, and then the second part would begin.

On the horizon a city would rise where street riots escalated into complete chaos. People stormed supermarkets, taking whatever they needed. Big businessmen cried over their empires as Molotov cocktails painted them in smoke and flame. Offices burned. Ties fell. Behind everything remained the ash of total freedom.

In the dream Helen saw herself at the gates of a camp. She wore a striped uniform. Beside her stood a prostitute who said, "Did everything really have to collapse for us to finally be free?"

Behind the gates the Sun blinded them and they began to run into uncertainty, full of expectation. Their eyes adjusted to the light, and then they saw what awaited them.

Behind the camp gates stood nothing but one vast, endless McDonalds restaurant.

Helen woke from this nightmare horrified every time she saw the yellow letter M. Then, with sweet nostalgia, she would recall certain features of Vlad's face that were already beginning to fade, and that was enough to silence the evil premonitions of her dream.

After that she would inevitably go to Mauritius, order wine, and listen to Adam still blowing into his trumpet and singing strange songs.

"Our Party is the right choice and the right solutioooooon, vote for the justice and new constituuuuution..." he sang into a small microphone attached to his computer.

"Cheerful little tune," Helen said.

Adam was always happy to see her, but soon he would return to his meaningless karaoke project, becoming indifferent to her presence. If she came, that was nice. If she did not, Mauritius was just as lovely without her.

"He hasn't called today either?" Adam asked about Vlad.

"No. He left. Definitely."

"He'll come back. They always come back."

Adam waved his hand and soon made a gesture Helen knew too well. He beckoned her closer to whisper something. She already guessed - more miraculous drugs hidden in his pocket.

"No, no, no," she shook her head and pushed him away. "You know what happened last time when you... ate that."

The last time Adam had been trapped in a serious paranoid trip. Helen had found him beside a painting, still wet, full of lifeless bodies and morbid hungry birds. Gray bodies and black birds circled through the small room in Mauritius. Destroyed canvases lay scattered everywhere. Adam sat curled in the corner, covering his head from the light.

He had destroyed all his paintings because witches were chasing him.

"We'll never do that again," he had said afterward. "It makes no sense. The stuff is bad. Drugs are for the rich: they have golden powder. We snort and swallow Saharan dust with pesticides that mice pissed on for ten years in some desert, sprayed with mint and ginseng oil to hide its true nature."

Of course, he had stopped saying that soon enough. He was flirting again with the idea of trying something new. Something alternative. Natural.

That day he had a brilliant idea.

He showed her white shavings on the glass plate of an old microscope.

"I know a Peruvian who raises frogs. He gave me this. Bufotenin - milk from the glands of the bufo frog is the most powerful hallucinogen known to man."

"Just this once," Helen told herself. "Just this and I'll return to the boredom and sleepiness of average Prozac."

Adam made several skillful moves.

"This is a very bad idea," she told him.

"I know," he said, "but we don't have better ones."

What he rolled looked like an ordinary cigarette without a filter. They each took a drag. The taste was, simply put, disgusting. No one expected pleasant flavor from amphibian milk.

In less than thirty seconds, all of black Africa danced before her.

A brightly colored rooster ran around Grin fire. Turquoise flames roared like beasts. Rattles and timpani beat in rhythm. Legba danced. A black man in a skirt of dried grass, eyes dark as tar and legs spread in a diamond shape, wore a wooden mask with

bloody smiling lips. He swung a red smoking pouch whose smoke smelled of oranges and pomegranates.

Under fragrant fog only colors remained - warm, melting colors. More and more people appeared from nowhere. Torches burned and screamed. Women painted their faces with white flour and drew circles on the ground.

Legba handed her a burning bottle. Helen drank and fell into trance, shaking, burning. Fever raged. Her heart beat against all the rules of a proper heart. It rebelled, jumped, screamed in the irregular rhythm of African drums and fiery howls.

Helen fainted.

She lay on the asphalt only a few seconds before a cold touch woke her. It was a garden gnome accompanied by Mini Mouse.

Mini Mouse was divorced. She smoked like a chimney, drank whiskey, and practiced astrology. The dream of our childhood had no stable job, took Lexapro, and drove an old Ford. Her lover imported sex toys from China and disliked paying taxes.

Helen passionately described the purple-tasting drink called Erzulie that Legba let her drink. She felt as if she had swallowed a spirit, someone's soul.

Mini Mouse was not impressed. She was arrogant, poisoned by tobacco and hungover, like all failed dreams of childhood.

The garden gnome was again full of Wikipedia knowledge. His voice was deep and soothing.

"Hebefrenic schizophrenia," he explained, "is a radical, nuclear form of schizophrenia closest to Kraepelin's characterization of dementia praecox. The word comes from the Greek hebos - boy, and phrenos - soul. Early onset. Marked affective changes. Regression, disinhibited, disorganized childish behavior, mannerisms, inappropriate laughter, philosophical obsessions. Rapid negative symptoms. Poor prognosis."

"I apologize," Mini Mouse said, "but that sounds like a typical Aquarius with Aries rising."

"Dear Lord Jesus Christ, I will never smoke a frog again," Helen whispered politely, smiling so as not to offend the cartoon figures.

From her left ear she heard Adam's timid voice. The fiery atheist muttered, "Dear Lord Jesus Christ, I will never smoke a frog again."

Again the wrong god, Helen thought. We Amians are always behind in divine trends. This nation suffers because it always prays to the one who has already fallen from power. By the time Amia switches, that one is fallen too.

"We'll never learn," she thought, lowering her head and struggling not to fall asleep.

"You'll never learn!" she shouted at Adam, who heard nothing, and finally collapsed into sleep.

The end of part one